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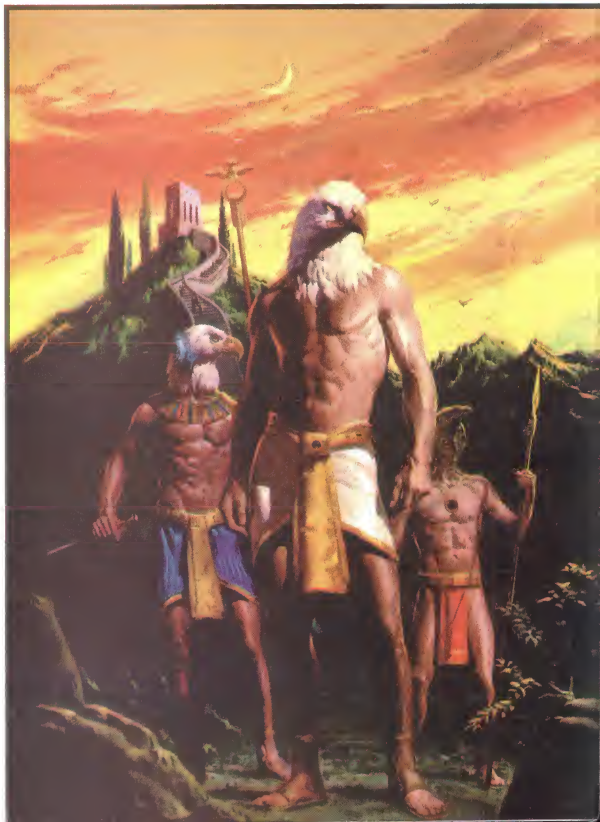
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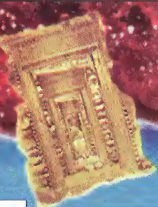
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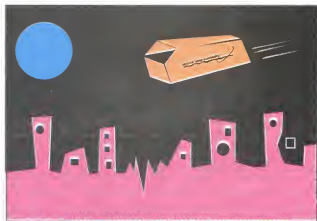
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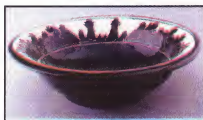
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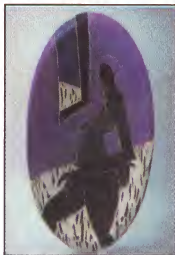
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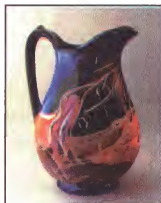
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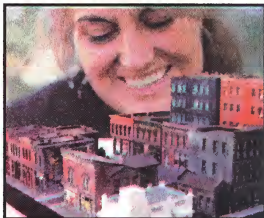
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ARTISTS

Claude Needham, Heather Valencia, Lin Larsen, Zoë, Tim Elston, Richard Hart, Vincent Di Fate, Stephanie Boyd, Seth Gold, Della Heywood, Kelly Rivera, Tom X, Tim Courtney, Frank Kelly Freas, Virgil Finlay

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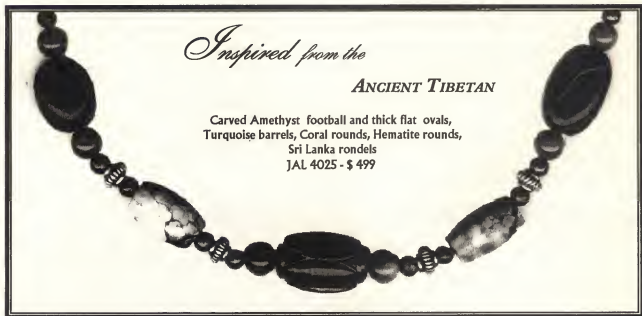
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EDITORIAL

By E.J. GOLD

Illustrated by Freas

The subways were full of people. Everybody knew that. But not everybody — even New Yorkers — knew that there were people *living* in the subways.

Ever since any kind of shelter against weather existed, humans have always used them. It's your basic exploitative species looking for a place to hang its hat.

Personal shelters aren't new; there's always been a bivy tent in one form or another, and yurts have been around an awfully long time.

Beowulf and friends consorted together in a sort of pelt-festooned wooden barn; that's been a fairly common form of shelter since neolithic times, and little has changed, if you've seen one of the Chicago housing projects lately.

The mead's gotten somewhat more predictable, but that hardly passes for "better."

But the people who live in the subway tunnels don't generally drink mead.

You can eat a lot of food for a quarter at some of those cheap standup joints around Times Square. You get to actually develop preferences for one brand of ketchup soup over another; one cheap bright yellow mustard might catch your fancy, and another — too skimpy with the petroleum byproducts — leave you unimpressed.

Beer and wine are never a problem, if you don't care who drank it first. Like the prison industry (for those tourists just entering the real world for the first time,

that's an environment provided by the government for the use of the underworld in the recruitment of enforcers, drug and numbers runners, pimps and prostitutes, and so forth, as well as a safe place from which to run all those public-service enterprises) there's never a lack of sex and drugs on the street.

That's how come the subway people are the only ones who aren't connected to the Wall Street crowd (the ones who carelessly throw over their shoulders that cocaine is their drug-of-choice).

The Wall Street cocainists (perhaps *that's* at least one of the reasons for all those bond scandals?) aren't the only ones to whom the subway dwellers are not connected.

Ordinarily, one could draw lines of connection, you see, like some sort of James Joyce storyline, between all elements of the social web. But that's just it. The subway dwellers are not part of the social web.

They're not like hoboes, gentlepersons of the road. Even hoboes had their impact on society, and it upon them. But not so the subway people. They neither participate nor draw upon our society in any way.

They don't even use our garbage, our throwaways.

What do they eat? Don't ask.

What do they wear? You don't want to know.

Where do they sleep? Who has the nerve to sleep down there?

What do they do all day?

I was hoping *you* would tell *me*. Word length, 5,000 to 10,000 at the usual rates. Don't mention this to anyone else. I wouldn't want to see two manuscripts with the same plotline.

— E. J. GOLD



SEVEN SOUP RIVERS

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Illustrated by Di Fate

There were two doors, and at first I thought I would go through the one on the right, for no special reason, just because you have to pick one if you are to go through at all, and the two doors seemed to me equal in appeal and promise. But as I approached them, and as the angle of perspective changed, I noticed a third door, previously concealed behind the curving wall in which the doors were set, and this door was to the right of my original choice, making my choice now the center door.

This third door, appearing so suddenly, disturbed me. I was feeling out of sorts anyhow. It had been a long and tedious trip since leaving Colomb, after the ill-fated affair with Morth. The signs I had encountered along the way had been ambiguous; you never understand what anything means until it's too late to do anything about it. And my knapsack was heavy, filled with necessities of the journey, as well as a dozen or more things I would probably never need but could not easily procure elsewhere should they prove necessary.

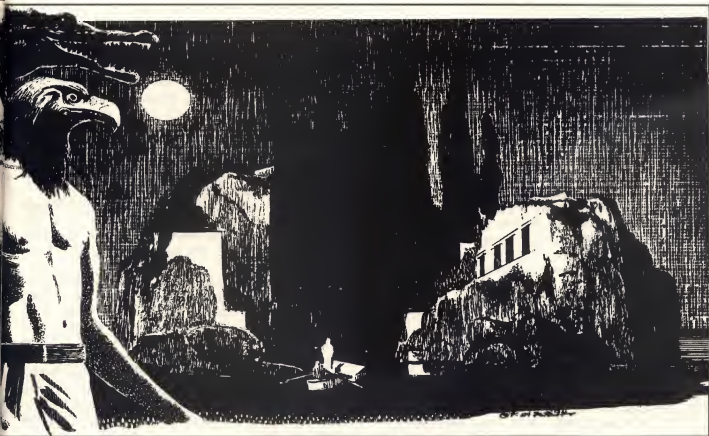
When you travel, you pack your whole life in miniature into your knapsack, not just what you really need — for who can know for sure what that is? — but

what you might need, or hope to need, or fear you will need. No wonder the straps bit into my shoulders from the sagging weight on my back.

And Glynnis' clever pointy little machine, which I had included at the last minute, had worked itself free of its padding and was digging me just above the hip. But I didn't want to stop and rearrange the load now — not with the entrance to Phocis just ahead of me, behind one of the three doors.

Coming up to the doors now, I looked and didn't much like what I saw. There seemed no difference in the two doors. Perhaps it wouldn't matter which I went through. Did it matter? I remembered Sicelle's advice: Beware the obvious! I had nodded sagely at the time, but now that I thought about it I realized it wasn't so easy to tell what the obvious was, or, having discovered it, to avoid its allure. My decision to walk boldly through the center door began to waver, and I cursed the irresolute quality of mind that made me think and think again whenever a choice had to be made. Something like this had occurred during my brief time with Morth, and I had sworn to learn from it. But what bearing did that have on the three doors?

I suppose I could have spent quite a long time in that dilemma, standing irresolutely in front of the three doors, backpack pulling on my shoulders, Glyn's little machine digging into my hip, my stomach making feed-me



noises. Perhaps it was hunger that decided me. Some primitive part of my brain knew unequivocally that it would never get fed as long as I hesitated here on the threshold at Phocis. So I lunged toward the center door, deviating at the last moment for no apparent reason to pass through the leftmost door.

The first thing I saw after passing through were the flamingoes. There were three of them, white and pink balls of feathers with long, skinny backward-hinged legs beneath, and long snakelike necks with flat small heads and curved black beaks below. Two of them were engaged in what I supposed was a standard sort of bird repartee, or perhaps a mating dance, squawking noisily at each other and darting their heads like duelists. The third bird, somewhat larger and colored a deeper orange, paid no attention to any of this. He was holding his head upside down on the surface of the shallow water in which they were all standing, and he was making some kind of vibrating motion that sent out little ripples. I thought perhaps he was stirring up little creatures in the water, but I didn't see him feed.

A thousand thoughts crowded my mind, one more bizarre than the next, and I might have retreated back through the door if it had still been there. Of course it was not. These are one-way doors into Phocis, and you have to go through a complex and tedious procedure to find an exit.

I was a long way from wanting to leave, since I had

hardly arrived. I looked at the flamingoes again and in a moment the most probable explanation occurred to me: that this was a decorative aviary, of a sort that is used to enhance public spaces, and that the reason I had entered into the middle of it was due to my choosing the wrong door after all, for I seemed to have taken a service door that had brought me into the middle of the aviary. I had made a mistake, but not a serious one, I thought, because a few steps took me out of the birds' vicinity (with my feet wet, of course) and onto the path that led to the interior of the reception area.

As I recovered the correct path I looked around hastily to see if anyone had noticed my *faux-pas*, not that I was afraid of punishment, but simply because one hates to make a fool of oneself when entering a new place. But there didn't seem to be anyone in my vicinity, just a long curving corridor with recessed lighting.

And then there was a sound of music, bagpipes and drum, and down the corridor came a group of people in brightly striped costumes of black, red and green. One had a bagpipe, another a snare drum, and the others, to judge by the lightness and grace of their movements, were dancers. They were performing some sort of a circle dance, while all the time taking little skipping sidesteps that carried them down the corridor toward me. There were two men and two women dancers, and the men carried tambourines, while the women clicked away with castanets.

I moved back to let them pass and the wall receded behind me and dissolved, and I found myself in a large open area without visible barriers, open to the sky or its simulation. There was reddish earth under my feet, pounded to a dry, hard consistency. Several trees with spreading limbs and dusty greenish-brown foliage stood in the middle distance, and far away I could see a low jagged line of slate-blue mountains. I scarcely had time to remark to myself on the speed and precision of the simulation, when a large group of people entered from wherever it was they came from. They were darkskinned, and some wore leopardskin wraparound garments, while others were in shiny suits reminiscent of a previous age.

The dancers had already begun their performance, and the newcomers looked at them in some amazement but without, I thought, much interest. From off to one side I could hear a further dull pounding noise, drums, I supposed, and some twittering flutelike instruments.

And then Llew was standing beside me. He had come up so suddenly I hadn't seem him approach. He was wearing an intensely patterned sports shirt and beige sharply creased slacks, and he had tasseled loafers on his small feet which I remembered now he was inordinately vain about.

"Well, come on," he said, "are you going to stand here gawking all day at the wedding party? I don't believe you were invited, unless you have connections you never told me about. For your information, that's the king of the Saloops, a purely hereditary post, no real power, and the fat man beside him talking in a rather vehement manner is his prime minister or whatever they call him in their own language. Kas-Desair, I think it is, I used to speak a bit of Gheul when I had the trading post on the Orimba. I told you about that, didn't I? Never mind, a few of the young men are coming your way. I think it's time to smile politely, make a cross with your arms over your head to show friendliness, and get the hell out of here."

"What about you?" I asked.

"They're not likely to object to me," Llew said. "I'm not really here at all; what you see is an interprojection. Nothing much they can do about me except call the Comptroller of Privacy and tell him there's a peeper in their midst."

Now that he mentioned it, I did notice the faint glimmer to Llew's appearance. At first I had thought it was just a trick of the light, but now I realized that of course he was communicating with me by interpro.

The two men approaching from the wedding party were very tall and strongly made. They were scowling, and they carried carved clubs with big knots on the end that looked like they could give quite a crack.

"How do I get out of here?" I asked Llew.

"Follow me," Llew said. "We'll double back around the flamingoes."

I turned hastily and followed as he glided up the path, around the flamingoes still doing their mating ritual

or whatever it was, through the shallow water again, and then through an abrupt little dogleg of a turn.

At first there was little to see; these exhibits usually have a fair amount of spatial extension, and so I was splashing through the water for entire minutes, with Llew, or rather his interpro projection, floating along beside me, very lifelike except that of course his feet weren't getting wet. After a while we came to the end of the exhibit and moved abruptly into utter blackness. They do that in the in-between bits to save energy, except for the glowing yellow line at your feet which guides you to the next open station.

Llew was chatting about some of our mutual friends, Laure and Dagon, who had recently made a one year affiliation; and Mauritita, who had taken a job at the Offworlds Agency, but was having trouble getting her documentation together.

I hoped for the best for Laure, whom I hadn't seen in some years, not since that summer in Green Island, back before the Trippies took it over and turned it into a rest home for followers of the New Gnosis. It was a pity, really, because places like Green Island don't come up every day or year, places where nature catches ahold, so to speak, gets it right, and there is a miraculous balance between the force-implanted flora and the various physical aspects of the island. It's very impractical, of course, setting up such a place, and usually it happens quite by accident.

I had met Llew originally at Green Island, where he had been studying psychopainting and getting drunk every night, but in a refined way that was not obnoxious. What fun we had that summer! But that was then and now was now. Now I had the affair of Phocis to consider, and I was wondering already how matters would go for me here.

Taking the big step and going to Phocis was no small matter. My reasons for coming here, which had seemed so sound when I left Earth, were beginning to seem to me vague in the extreme, and unfounded in reality. Already I had Glynnis' little machine, which seemed almost to have a mind of its own.

I had to face it: I must have made the mistake of coming in the wrong door. If I had selected the right one, whichever that one was, I wouldn't be stumbling along in darkness now, in the network that linked together the exhibits, following a thin glowing yellow line which stretched on interminably into the impenetrable black. And of course I was still carrying the heavy knapsack, and I had not had a chance to readjust the position of its own. I was pondering these matters when there was a crystalline tinkle of bells in the air, an automatic signal set off by my approach, presaging an event of some sort about to happen. The Phocians are clever about that sort of thing, warning you in advance of an impending situation, though of course they don't tell you just what it will be.

"What do you suppose it is this time?" I asked Llew.

There was no reply. I looked around, turning in a complete circle. Llew wasn't there any more. Interruptions in intrabeam projection are fairly common, so I wasn't worried, although it had come at an inconvenient time. Continuing my advance, I saw that the yellow line had changed into a squiggle, and that it was crossed by red and green lines. What the Phocians rather grandly call a conturbation of cross purposes.

Well, I had been expecting something like that, and so I continued to advance with at least the outward signs of confidence; until once again the lights came up and I was set forth into another scene.

This one was not immediately familiar. I seemed to have gotten myself into a dark little room, made of roughly dressed rock, with a ceiling not much above my own height. There was a plain wooden bed against one wall, a table and chair. There was a little partition, waist high, and behind it I saw a man in a blue and red uniform, some sort of soldier's outfit, carrying what looked like an ancient musket. His hair was dark and long and gathered in back in a little ponytail. He was smoking a clay pipe, which he put down when he noticed me.

"Good morning, citizen," he said. "I am glad you have awakened. Your breakfast is under the napkin, on that plate on the little table. There is a Bible nearby for your morning devotions. An examiner will come speak to you presently. I am required to say these things to you to provide basic orientation, so you will not say this was omitted when the time of your judgement comes. I am not allowed further discourse. So if it is all perfectly clear, I will return to my newspaper."

"Wait a minute," I said, "nothing is clear at all. Where am I? What is this place? This appears to be a cell of some sort, is that correct? If so, what am I accused of?"

"Citizen," he said, "these are not matters for me to discuss with you. Save it all for the examiner."

"Just tell me what I'm doing here."

The guard stood up. He was a tall man, strongly made, and his face was rough and not friendly.

"I have done my duty," he said. "You will not require more of me. If you will not shut up, I will shut you up with this." He brandished his musket like a club. "They will say I was within my rights if I knock you out to prevent further illegal interrogation."

His manner had changed to one of overt threat. I didn't reply to him, for he looked ready to use his weapon. This was ridiculous, of course, and clearly the result of some misunderstanding. But it seemed I would risk a crack over the skull if I persisted in trying to clear it up now. I turned away from him and sat down on the chair and picked up the Bible. He watched me for a moment, then took a seat again and picked up his newspaper. In a moment he had his pipe going and seemed contented.

I was a long way from content, but what was I to do? The fellow's hostility had been so evident, and had come

on so quickly, that I thought it best not to provoke him. I leafed through the pages of the Bible. It was written in a language I did not understand. Even the alphabet was unfamiliar to me, so I could take no comfort even from mumbling the words. I put it down and eased the knapsack off my shoulders, glancing at the guard as I did so. He didn't look up from his newspaper. Apparently this action, at least, was not forbidden.

Opening the knapsack, I rummaged around for something to read. I badly needed to calm my nerves, for this was an uncanny situation.

' And where in hell was Llew? Surely he had had time to restore service to his projection by now? But Llew was nowhere around, and, looking around the cell, I could see no communication devices, unless they were concealed in the dim painting on the wall, which showed men and women in old-fashioned clothing taking a picnic in some idealized forest clearing. I wished I could join them.

Again, keeping an eye on the guard, I stood up to examine the painting more closely. It seemed to draw me closer by some inherent magnetism. I studied it carefully. The bushes it portrayed looked artificial. Was that intentional? While I studied it, I could hear the sound of footsteps coming down from the corridor outside.

The forest proved no real refuge. Once I was irrevocably within it, I saw it was an ominous place, full of toadstools and noxious plants with misshapen heads. Of the noble company from the picture on the wall I could see no sign. Where had they gone? Had I dallied too long in the prison cell? So it would seem. At least I still had my knapsack, though I couldn't remember putting it on my back again.

In this place of big trees and dense shrubbery all directions seemed the same. I moved, instinctively as it were, in the direction of greatest light, though it was not an easy thing to distinguish even that. The gray twilight of the forest wrapped everything in a pall of obscurity.

I pushed on, wading through the shrubbery and low clinging plants. This seemed to me a place of evil omen. How had I gotten here? I had no patience to consider that, not now, not with the feeling that something was closing in on me from behind. I had no idea what it might be. The main noises were of my passage, and now and then a little flaw of wind came through and ruffled the branches overhead.

I remembered now that I had not eaten in a very long time, and I decided to stop and rummage through my knapsack. I didn't think I had packed anything edible, but you could never tell, sometimes you drop in something; a half-finished sandwich, a piece of cheese, a box of crackers, anything would do.

I put my knapsack on a little rise of ground and crouched down beside it. The light was failing. Soon it would be full dark.

And I had no idea where I was or where I was going.

I knew, of course, in a general sort of way, that this was one of the tricks they play on you in Phocis, one of their celebrated illusions, here in this place where nothing is as it seems. But that knowledge did me no good now, because it is generally true of every situation, it is always difficult to discern the truth from the illusion, even in hindsight, when it can do you no good. I cursed Llew for abandoning me, for so it seemed now. A breakdown could not account for his long absence.

In my bag I found a package of nuts, a free gift they had given me on the transporter, and which I had not eaten at the time. I started to eat the nuts, but realized I would need water soon, for the stuff was very dry. Water is a commonplace miracle, only to be considered when you have it not. That was the case now. I got up again and looked around, with the vague idea of finding lower ground, where, I've been told, water collects. Wearily I packed up my knapsack again, slipped my arms into the straps. As I did so, I heard a voice, but I couldn't make out what it said.

"Who is there?" I called out.

"A guide," the voice replied. I turned, trying to place its direction. It seemed to be near me, yet I could see nothing but the dense green-gray of the forest, and the gathering dim shadows as night fell.

"Come out and let me see you," I said.

There was no answer for a while. Then I heard a noise in the underbrush to my right and I turned. There was some sort of animal standing there, and it turned its head to look at me. I think it was a deer of some kind, colored mouse-gray, with sensitive ears that twitched in the mounting breeze, as though trying to listen to the message brought by the wind.

"You have chosen a poor way to go," the deer said.

"Me? I didn't choose anything!"

"I'm not here to argue," the deer said. "But it has been my experience that anyone who comes here does so through his or her own choice."

"I suppose that's true, in a general sense," I replied. "And I suppose you are not a real animal."

"Perhaps not," the deer said. "Does it matter?"

"Real animals don't talk, not in the general run of things."

"No. But men do not walk into portraits, in the general run of things, as you say. Have you not noticed that general rules are only for contemplation over the fact, when one can engage in comfortable generalizing, while what happens at first hand is invariably exceptional and specific?"

"You've got a point there," I said. "But I'm not here to argue discursive philosophy with you, especially since what you say is mundane in the extreme. Can you get me out of here?"

"Perhaps," the deer said. "Where do you wish to go?"

"I had hoped to reach Phocis Central," I told him. "I have friends waiting for me there."

"Then you are expected?"

"Well, not really. I didn't have time to tell anyone my plans before my hurried departure from Point Zero. The communication devices from solar point to point are difficult to manage, and I had thought to save time by merely coming. Sometimes it's easier to send yourself than to send a message."

"True, enough," the deer said. "But then you must suffer the consequences of being yourself your own message presaging your coming."

"What consequences?"

"Messages are frequently disregarded. But I can see you have no wish to discuss these matters. Follow me, we'll see what we can do for you."

The deer trotted off into the underbrush and I followed.

Twilight was falling fast. The trunks of the trees were becoming indistinct. My throat was very dry, and after a while I asked, "Is there something to drink around here?"

"Oh, yes, there's something to drink, though I don't think I would recommend it."

"I need water!"

"Then of course you must drink. Come this way."

We had gotten onto a little path now, and it proceeded downward at no very steep angle. There were fireflies in the gloom, and they sparkled prettily. The forest had grown very still. After a while we came to a dark little pool lying in a declivity at the foot of large trees. I walked to its edge, bent down and with cupped hands brought up water. As soon as I had sipped, I greedily wanted more, and then still more. The deer stood very still as I drank, and I thought there was something judgmental in his attitude.

"Is there anything wrong in what I'm doing?" I asked. "Surely the water is free for everyone?"

"Oh, it's free enough," the deer said. "That's the difficulty. It stays free inside just as it did on the outside."

That made no sense. And yet, I could feel the water in my stomach, and I bent to drink more. With interlocked fingers I drew it up to me. The water seemed to form a little transparent ball. I had to eat it rather than drink it. I stopped hastily and moved back from the edge of the pool. The deer was watching me curiously. I felt something peculiar going on in my stomach. I had a sense of inner expansion. It was as though the small amount of water I had drunk, surely no more than half a pint or so, were expanding. I felt the presence of water within me, not a part of me, separate, free, as the deer had said.

"What is happening?" I asked. "What have you done to me?"

"There are many keys to this place," the deer replied. "I have merely provided what you claim to have needed. The rest is up to you, and to it."

I didn't know what it was talking about. No, I did know, but I didn't want to. Something was going to happen, and again I was not ready for it. The water in my

stomach was expanding. It wasn't water, it was acid. It seemed to be dissolving me into it.

"Help me!" I said.

"I'm afraid I've already done so," the deer said. And then the water rose within me, and I was a paper man dissolving into myself.

The image made no sense to me, but there it was. Water was rising, and I fell to the forest floor, dropping with a squish. I was all water, held together by surface tension. It seemed to me most unfair, the way they ring these changes onto you. Whatever happened to the stable old world? Or had that always been a myth, a dream of order in an impossible world?

I felt myself dissolving into myself. I felt the surface tension break, and I was water, flowing back down the forest into the little pool. I was aware of the deer, watching, and then moving away. There was something sorrowful about the set of his head, his large luminous brown eyes. I thought he felt sorry for me. God knows he had company, because I was sufficiently sorry for myself.

But how can water be sorry? That question held my attention for a moment, then was gone. I was entirely of a liquid substance. I became aware that I was the pool of water. It would not be too far-fetched to say that it had drunk me. And now I was this and what was I to do next?

"My sweetheart's the man in the moon. I know I will marry him soon . . ."

I was listening to a thin, piping, childish voice that was somehow familiar. My head felt cloudy and full of cobwebs. Hadn't I just been turned into water? What a relief to find that I was solid again, a man rather than a nature spirit or whatever it was I'd changed into. My relief was also accompanied by a sense of regret, however. Being in a dire situation is quite interesting!

On second thought, however, I decided my relief was premature. I hadn't yet received any visual information concerning my situation. Why was this? I could think of several reasons: first, that I had my eyes closed; second, that there was no light by which to see anything; third, that there was light, and that I did have visual perceiving apparatus, viz, eyes, but that my mind, brain, think-tank, whatever you want to call it, either wasn't taking it in, or, was taking it in but was refusing to pass on results to other parts of the world-detecting system that was my mind/brain.

It seemed to me there might be other possibilities. But I had no time to consider them. The first, the paramount question, was to explore the perceptual possibilities. This too could be narrowed down to one: should I be seeing anything or not? And if I should, should I take steps now to see what might be seen, or as to disabuse myself of the idea of complicity in what I was presently considering my own hysterical blindness? Or was I perhaps overstating the case?

Because it seemed to me, even on the slightest

reflection that I really didn't have to force myself to see, it would either happen naturally or not at all. I thought of the evolutionary development of sight. Those early rudimentary creatures who are our ancestors seeing-wise, they surely did not have to apply will power to the matter of seeing, did they? They either saw or they did not see, and intentionality, that big soft plaything of the scientists, had little or nothing to do about it.

Yet was it quite as simple as that? What had been the steps, the gradations, between seeing and not-seeing? At what point on the scale could a person be considered to be not seeing, and how did he cross the line, the great evolutionary line, into seeing? And, as far as that goes, were there other visionary senses beyond seeing, related to it, perhaps, but still distinct and different, of which seeing was but the first step? Might one say that visioning was to seeing as Hyperion to a satyr, to employ Shakespeare's euphonious phrase?

The more I thought of it the more I thought of it. This was serious stuff. One needs to decide things about the perceptual possibilities of a situation before going on. Until you know how you're looking, how can you know what you're looking for? Our ancestors were satisfied with much less, of course. Colored shadows on the walls of the caves, it makes one laugh now to consider it. But this was now, and the question, long deferred, needed dealing with. Or it needed *not* dealing with, but that too was a decision, and was based in turn upon a perceptual decision.

"That's certainly true enough," Seligman said. "But have you considered the aura of comprehensibility that surrounds even the most unfamiliar proposition? We are unable to be taken completely by surprise, because the mind converts all precepts into the form of the familiar, of which the unfamiliar is but a part."

"By god, you're right," I said. "It's difficult to pull off a good surprise, isn't it?"

"Yes. But you've done better than most. You have always been a good student. I have given you an A for your work in the aesthetics of self-deception."

The visual field had opened up just as suddenly as that. I was in a classroom. My only connection with what had come before was the knapsack. It was on the floor beside me, its mouth gaping open. Glancing down, I saw that someone had been rummaging through it. Myself, no doubt. I looked down and inspected. Yes, something was missing. It took me no more than a minute to ascertain that it was Glynnis' clever pointy little machine that had been taken out by someone, very possibly me, and presumably put to work.

I remember the charming smile on Glynnis' face when he had given it to me. Or had he been a she that day? It's so difficult to remember who is what at any one time in these times of easy sexual migration. But of course we don't intend to open the question of sex here, no more than we would enquire as to what you had for breakfast. These are matters for individual conscience.

The splitup, the convergence — these are matters to avoid, if it becomes possible. Put in its most simple form, Glynnis and I were not having sex that day so long ago when Glynnis gave me the little machine and said, "I will miss you," calling me by name, whatever name I was going by then, and doing something else, too, making some gesture, poignant, unrepeatable. And then she gave me the machine.

I looked around to see what had happened to it. The elg, as they call those small machines that converse in the Linshiean tongue, the language of sexual commerce, was resting on the floor near my feet. It was still moving in circles which were diminishing in speed and amplitude, following the well-known dictates of Rosko's Law, that what was going on just before you perceived the situation cannot be safely inferred from what is going on now. The machine is difficult to speak about because of that. At this particular time when I was looking at it, it looked heavier than usual, more consequential, and worthy of a certain wary respect.

I picked it up, thanking my lucky stars that I was no longer in the aqueous state, because I'd had a feeling that was going to be a difficult one, descriptionwise. I mean, after you say, I spread, what else is there to say?

Luckily, this situation was quite different, leading me to think that the deer had not been entirely forthright when he warned me of But I couldn't quite remember what it was. It's hard enough to figure out what is coming up next, without having to think a lot about what has just gone before. And as for the passing states, those without enough perseverance to be worthy of describing, well, what can we say about them except full speed ahead and let every man watch out for himself.

"Are you quite finished rambling?" Llew said to me.

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes. After a moment things swam back into focus. There was Llew, still as an introjected form, standing in front of me and surveying me with signs of a certain anxiety. I remembered that Llew had always been subject to concerns.

"I'm alright," I said. "What's going on?"

"We're trying to get you to Phocis Central," Llew said. "I do wish you'd cooperate."

"I think I am cooperating!"

"No, really, you must pay attention and not go along with everything that comes up. You know what it's like in Phocis, the place has myriad attractions, one can go astray, in fact, going astray is the epitome of the Phocis experience, but it is also a sort of self-indulgence and you can't afford that now, not if you want to get where you're going."

"But where am I going?"

And then it happened. I scarcely dare tell what, so momentous was that moment. As it seemed to me then, I looked up. I stared into the visual field, which is the only place to which you can direct your attention, normally, that is. On my right I saw the forest, lying out before me like a dragon, sunning itself on the main street of some

hapless town in the unsure month of August, in Phocis of my direst predictions.

And then I looked to my left, and saw there another sight, this one a city, a towering place of many metallic complications, running toward the dawn light with a faint trepidatious coloring. Insects moved in the forest, metallic bugs crawled in the city. I couldn't quite believe it. Not really. There seemed to be a choice.

I could go right, back into the forest, or left, into the city.

As I looked at this split vision, I saw that the two, city and forest, were not truly contemporaneous. They seemed to be butted against one another in an imperfect joint. They were not coexistent. They were differently formed and strangely put together. There were details in the one not consonant with the details in the other.

I did not know what to do, and decided to take the civilized way out. This was no time to get hung up in a disparity, if there ever is such a time. I turned my back on the forest, which promptly winked out of existence. I advanced toward the city.

Other sights came into play at the corners of my vision. I saw shooting stars, and big, slowly turning spheroids of an imperturbable grey color. I saw men and women dancing in the streets, under the blinding arc lights. I saw the haunted face of a young girl, her eyes turned toward me in grief. I looked further and saw something else. A trail, a road that mounted into the sky.

Then to me so lying asleep a vision came without hands and touched me. It was none other than a pointy little machine, which had made its way out of my knapsack and was clinging to my shoulder.

"What's happening?" it asked me.

"That's a silly thing to ask me," I said. "Where is Llew? He was just here a moment ago, unless I miss my guess."

"I'm afraid you do miss it," the machine said. "That was not Llew."

"But how could that be?"

"Easily enough, given the ever-present possibility of illusion, deception, and the gullibility of the multitudes."

I twisted my neck to look at this machine sitting on my neck, partially supported by my shoulder. He (as I eventually came to think of him) was a dull gunmetal green, exactly as I remembered. Little lights winked on and off across his surface. He resembled a rather large lump of metal that has lain for a long time in a river bottom. Yet his voice was seductive. I turned away from him quickly, because I did not want to lose sight of the city. Yes, it was still there. The forest was fading out of my split vision. My split vision was almost healed. If only I could keep my attention on the main chance: the city, food, comfort, sex, and movies!

"Do you really think it's as easy as that?" the machine asked.

"What's the trouble? Isn't the city real?"

"Sometimes it is and sometimes it's not."

"What about this time?"

"It depends on your frame of reference, old boy."

"I don't like to hear talk like that."

"But hear it you shall. You need a good talking to, my lad. This nonsense has gone on long enough. What are you trying to do, start a revolution? Haven't we enough trouble around here without you adding to it?"

To hear these words from a mere machine was humiliating in the extreme. It was annoying, how quickly a premise was hardening around me. I took thought, but not very far. I considered changing identities. But it was difficult with this thing clinging to me.

And then I found myself in the streets of the city. They twisted like writhing snakes. Some of them twisted like snakes trying to go straight. It was one of those sights the cosmos sends your way from time to time, but not often.

There were little shops on the ground level. I looked them over with some concern. What were they selling in those shops? Food, for example? Sex? There had to be something here I could buy and sell. You see, I was looking for a purpose.

After a while I came across a purposes store with a gaudy sign in front. *Purposes of all Kinds*. I didn't know what to make of that. It seemed a dire imposition, being forced to think of it at all. So I put down other words, covered my trail with another trail, put cross trails across the trails that showed the way I had gone. Just taking precautions.

After a while I came to a government office. *Observe fear all you who enter here*. That was written on the door. I observed it, and I couldn't help but smile, because that was so like them, the Phocians, diving into the heavy dreariness of statement, when all along they knew not what.

But who was I to talk? I had to laugh aloud, because the whole situation was crazy and desperate and unworkable, and it had started out so well, and I knew it and could do nothing about it except continue: foul quitter doesn't win fair adventure.

It happened while I was standing there trying to shift mental gears. The moth-shaped clue went round and round and then dove into confusion, taking me along with it. I see the stars and the stars see me. Great haste makes great waste. Great wastes spread out on all sides of me. Where in hell did they put the city? Someone seems to have misplaced it and it wasn't me. Goddamn them anyhow, the ones who spoil everything. And I had been so looking forward to this, to finding some nice discrete and reasonable proposition in which to hide myself. I wanted a girl to love and a sandwich to eat. I wanted a way out of the mysteries and uncertainties. And here I was in a space that refused delineation.

What can I say about it? Narration has its limits. I tell you there was literally nothing there. From that small beginning, nothingness spread out on all sides, and as I looked, my vision increased in acuity, and I saw deeper and deeper into the nothingness. My eye ached for some

little object to grab ahold of. Even the weight of the knapsack would have been a relief at this point. So this is death, I told myself, and I have reached it too soon.

"Welcome to the kingdom of death," someone said to me.

I could of course see nothing. Pretty soon I was going to see plenty, but right now I couldn't see a thing. And that was just too bad for me. Yet I had heard a voice. It welcomed me to death, the place I had long suspected I was heading for. It brought a certain relief, but with it the necessity of reply.

"Hello," I said. That seemed neutral enough.

"Hello yourself," the voice replied.

So there I was in the midst of nothingness with a voice doing schtick with me. It was insupportable. But there was nothing to do but support it. I tried to conjure up a vision. Surely any something would be better than this nothingness. But the vision wouldn't come. Instead, a smell came. It smelled like aging mouse-droppings. I didn't like that at all, and its implications even less. What was that to do with me? I was in this place, and a voice was saying hello.

"Now look," the voice said, "we can't go on like this. We need to find a way, a *modus operandi*. Can't you hear me, Caroline? Can't you hear me singing to you? Can't you find a place in your heart for the embarrassed as well as the ones who didn't give a damn, to say nothing of the ones who aren't even there any more? Now I ask you, isn't there a way we can get it on together?"

"Perhaps if you'd show yourself!" I suggested, for the person whoever it was had failed to perform even that rudimentary act of civility.

"Hah! That's rich! The mud asking the pot to crow! That's not what we want here at all. What we want is for something to happen. Isn't that so?"

"Perhaps enough has happened already?" I suggested. It seemed right that I should go easy, try not to be careless, or try to be careless, but in a purposeful manner, I wasn't sure which was the right tack to take. If only this damned incoherence would clear up! But no such luck, it went on, and I was going on, too.

Then Sicelle was there. She looked as lovely as ever, her hair in a long wave down her front, her small heart-shaped face looking at me with what I thought was concern but might have been no more than dyspepsia.

"Ogden," she said, a name which I accepted at the time but later found more than a little unlikely, given what I remember of my circumstances, which I mean to get into later. But for now, look, do I look like an Ogden?

"You look as if you've been ill."

That was a laugh. What else does one do, lying in bed this way, the overhead fan going and the heat rising, except to be ill, very ill, as ill as possible? That seemed to be the setup. But I wasn't sure, that was the damnable thing.

Patience. Cunning. Don't give anything away.

"Have I been here long?" I asked her.

"Perhaps you shouldn't speak just now," Sicelle said. "Here, have some soup."

She lifted my head with one hand and poured soup into my mouth through a long hollow spoon. It was good soup, chicken soup, though I wasn't sure what I was eating it for. Were the objects of life still to be maintained in some other place reserved for me, and would that place simply go on? Or was that asking too much? Despite my brave front, I wasn't at all sure.

"Now then, Ogden," she said, "you just get hold of yourself. The confusion will lift. This is what they call the circle of confusion. I know you aren't hearing me quite correctly. But try to make some sense out of these words."

Sicelle had always been a nice person, even when she was dating Edgar. I remembered those days of squalor, the little flat in the West Village, the coffee shops, the songs of the strolling minstrels, some from as far away as 12th century France. Those had been good days, though it hadn't seemed so at the time. I wished I were there now, wherever there was.

But then I remembered that these memories, although perfectly genuine, might not be my memories at all. It was not unknown for a traveler such as myself, before leaving the safe shores of iterative self-reference, where all you can do is think about yourself, and so keep yourself in existence, to borrow or rent or even buy one or more of someone else's memories when he's going on a trip to strange places, so he could have some people to look up when he gets there, since remembering a person is tantamount to knowing that person even if you've never actually met.

I looked up. There was a light flashing overhead. A recorded voice said, "Visiting hours are over."

And then Sicelle began to fade.

"Don't leave yet!" I cried. "You are my last oasis of sanity here in a world I never made."

But she continued to fade, smiling her small smile. The walls were suddenly there, a yellow stucco, and I decided that ignorance was better than bliss, better than this, better than a kiss.

When I looked up again, I was in a different place. That's how it works sometimes.

"Hello out there!" I called. But there was no reply. All was confusion. It was the circle of confusion that I have mentioned before. I didn't know what to say about it. But you have to talk your way out of it, and after a while the survival instinct took over and words pressed and jumbled at the back of my throat. One sentence rose, and then another. I couldn't find a way to express them. I knew I was having a relapse. But to what? What was the dim meaning of all this? Where was I going?

It was time to decide on a course of action. I imagined a staff of ironwood, strong, natural, a goodly substance that I could work with.

Immediately I was out of the hospital room. Perhaps I had never been there in the first place. Or, rotten thought, perhaps I was still there. But in that case what was I doing going to a new place?

Home was never like this, a sentence colliding in my head. Yet so it is, Ananda. The big old house, the walk-in closet fragrant with cedar paneling, the big tree outside with the spreading branches, "secret closets of lone desire," as Sidney Lanier calls them, and superimposed on that, several apartments in several cities, brought here together to view the last of me, a dying remnant. No, sorry, didn't mean that last. It takes a lot to tell about it. It seems to you blotchy, does it? Yet the intent to confuse is not there. All these templates of home crowding in on each other like transparent pages of a calendar whipping madly in the winds of time in which we sail.

And so I reached the spot where I made one. "Hello, everybody, I'm home!"

A stirring in the kitchen. Smell of apple pie, euphonious, unanimous.

"Why, hello, Ogden," said Mom.

I had fallen into a page in the dark book. But it's nice you can go back again, and again and again. I had a sudden desire to visit the chamber of ancestors. They were all there, even some we didn't remember, facsimiles of those, who took place before reattribution could begin its work of making whole the torn pages of memory. There was Uncle Seth, Uncle Dan, Uncle George, Uncle Charles, there were all the aunts, ranged neatly on one side of the chamber, each doing a characteristic thing, pasting stamps into a collection, polishing silver, dusting a collection of old American glass.

"What are you doing here?" Uncle Seymour asked. "I thought you were going on a trip."

"Why so I was," I told him, "and I still am. But the unexpected turns and twists of this our life have brought me here again."

He smiled at me fondly; the fact that he wasn't living confined him to this single chamber, and I believe he resented it very much. But we must have some differentiation between the quick and the dead, else what's a heaven for?

My mother called from the other room, would I take coffee with her? I hastened to join her in the yellow-wallpapered room, where the unremarkable trees of New Jersey cast their ever-lovin' light on thee. I never could figure out about mother, you'd think with this opportunity to find out certain hidden happenings from what they tell me was my childhood, I'd take advantage. But it doesn't always work that way. There's a certain reticence at work. Our family, the family of man, has spread so enormously since the anti-Platonic doctrines received general dissemination, that you'd expect . . .

Oh I don't know what you'd expect. This

enormously extended family spread throughout space and time, all there, all waiting for you, and you for them. My own children coming for to carry me home. And yet it didn't help, there was no happiness in it, only confusion, actually not a confusion in my own life, that went on as these things usually do, but a confusion in reporting what was taking place.

For how am I to explain that through a loop, unexpected but inevitable, I had doubled back in my attempt to get into Phocis, returned to my own childhood, and was passing now through those caverns of time and memory?

Well, I've said it, but it's not convincing, the hypothetical man from Mars wouldn't know what to make of it. I was there in the kitchen taking coffee with my mother, and at the edge of my vision I could see the pathway that led back to where I had intended to go in the first place. Should I avail myself of it? There's always a moment of upset when you take your departure from the simulacra of your past. They are surprised — sorry, Mom, I have to mount yonder rainbow and ride away. The next time you come all is forgotten, or at least not spoken about. No one mentions the fact that you simply climbed invisible steps in your own kitchen and disappeared into the god knows where. But it seems to hang there like a chrome-plated fart, a bit of nastiness, a bit out of character.

And yet I was not ready to go as quickly as all that. I had been a long time away from the home place. It's surprising how seldom it comes up on the round of possibilities, born again into the round of revisitations, where nothing happens for the first time and there is no end. Or so I believe. No end!

I looked around at those scenes of my childhood and wondered to whom they belonged. It seemed strange and unbelievable to me that I could ever have swung in that swing, that I had played croquet with that scratched and dirty mallet with the orange band. It meant as little to me as the flamingoes of a previous time. Yet there was nothing more to say about it. Not only can you not come home again, you don't even want to, because you can't even recognize the place except from the newspaper clippings.

In a blink of the eye the scene had shifted. I don't suppose I really had to blink my eye to make it happen. Sicelle had warned me about that sort of thing. A slip of the lip can smear the lipstick, she told me. I was there with her again, this time in a pleasant little pub in London. This hadn't actually happened yet, of course, but it was bound to take place in the eternal recurrence of things.

I ordered a bottled beer, a Mexican one, just to be devilish. Sycelle ordered one of those colorful drinks with creme de menthe in it. We settled back in the pleasant fug and tobacco-colored smoke of the place with its glints of light off the brass and its rich red of mahogany bars. I was enjoying myself. This was as close

as I'd ever get to the first time. We create a new first time by forgetting the other first time.

"So where are you going?" Sicelle asked.

"To Phocis," I replied.

"Again?"

I had never been there before, but I nodded. It's a mistake to think in terms of novelty here in the world of crowded images and endlessly long shiny curving corridors in which everything is cycled and recycled, displayed and destroyed and displayed again.

Nevertheless, I persevered. "I'm going to Phocis," I said.

"Take me with you," she said.

I shook my head. Novelty was what I was after, still and forever. Sicelle was nice, Glynnis was nice, but I was not prepared to settle down, to put my memories of past and future into the bank, to live my life with blinkers, blinders, glanders, salamanders.

"You're making a mistake," Sicelle said, brushing back her bright, tightly kinked hair. I finished my beer and ordered another one. I vaguely noticed that this was a time before my operation. I felt quite fit and was happy to notice it. You have to give some credit to the cosmos that I suppose directs all this nonsense.

And then I was in a different place, this one with gleaming chrome surfaces and big animated portraits on the wall of beings I couldn't remember having seen before but of course I could be mistaken. Llew was with me again. He was holding my knapsack.

"You almost forgot this," he said. "The authorities want you to have it back. Nothing illegal in it, I hope?"

"I hope not, too," I told him, because you can never tell what a knapsack will pick up when it's not in your hands.

"Now then," Llew said, "it's time we saw the burgomeister or whatever they call him here. He will regularize your position. I'm afraid it's a black mark against you that you entered by the wrong door."

"But how was I to know?" I asked him.

Llew shrugged. "Don't tell me about it, old boy. I know the impossibility of avoiding egregious error. Who knows better?" And here Llew rolled his eyes, alluding to some misfired adventure in the past that he thought I was aware of. As a matter of fact, I had neglected to rent Llew's second-rank memories, contenting myself with just a couple of the really ripe ones.

I said, "I had no indications as to the correct path."

"And that excuses you from error, it really does, but only in my eyes. The authorities here take no excuses, or at least none that I've been able to offer so far in your behalf, and they are fairly ticked off about it, silly buggers that they are. You went to the prison without paying your entry, by the way."

"I didn't even know I was going there."

"Tell that to the cops." Llew shook his head and rolled a cigarette.

I wondered if he was using dope. It goes in and out

of legality so rapidly, you scarcely know whether you're breaking a law. One man has said that no matter what you do, you're always breaking a law somewhere.

And then we ate lunch. Bloody well about time, that was my estimation of it. It was one of those oriental deals, everything cut up and unrecognizable and laced with a heavy sauce. I put it down without difficulty. Llew was toying with his food, drinking cup after cup of strong coffee. He seemed unhappy about something.

After a while he said, "There's something I need to tell you."

I waited. He didn't speak.

I said, "Well, come on, out with it. Is there something else wrong I've done?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, old boy."

"Try just saying it."

"It seems you've been marked for death."

At first I just looked at him. And then I said, "And you tell it to me like that?"

"My dear fellow!" Llew said. "There's no good way."

Explosions in the grass. The moves of the rinderpest beast. What useless images flock to the mind in times of stress! What can you say when they say to you, "You've been marked for death?" What can I say after I say I'm sorry? You think to yourself, I always knew it was coming. Looks like this is the night the old continuity burns down.

You say, "In what form does it come, then, this thing you call death?"

"You may not recognize it when it comes," Llew said.

"Then why do you tell me about it?"

"Forewarned, forearmed, old boy. Or so they say."

But was I forearmed? I had a lawyer's writ absolutely barring death from coming within 30 feet of me without having previously obtained my written consent. I was afraid he would not abide by that. What could they do to him if he overstepped his bounds, and came to serve me here in the land of eternal youth? They could shout and grumble all they wanted, Death pretty well did as he pleased. But of course, there was always the possibility of making a deal.

I left Llew and consulted a phone book. There under *Death, Deals with*, I found the numbers of several Death Brokers.

I called the first on the list. There was no time to lose.

He came to me at once, a short little man with a wen on one side of his freckled forehead. It may have been something else but I call it a wen. He sat back behind a big desk. The background had changed too, of course. He wore a green surgeon's gown. I learned later he had been operating on volunteer patients over at the Saltpetriere.

"What can you do for me?" I asked, deciding I might

as well get it all out front.

"First of all, are you sure you received the notice?"

I dug into my pocket and found it. After Llew had told me, I had taken a moment's notice, and sure enough, I still had it.

And so I went on. It was important to do this in a carefully measured way. How much grief is brought on by haste, and its ominous twin, Thompson! But I had determined that I could get out of the snakepit, as they call the place where death hangs out with his crosscut saw and his crossword puzzle, his bull's pizzle and his rainy day anthems to a certain faded glory of the power that once had been.

"It really was bad of Mr. Death," Glynnis said, to me, "coming to our party that way. I know he can go where he wants, but we had taken such care to get it all just right, you would have thought he could have waited just a few hours, until everybody had come and gone. He's done it for plenty of other people, why not for us? But no, no such thing."

He was applying a formal technique, one I knew well, dissonant regression in a vinegar base, but despite my experience I was taken in by its magic anyhow. He had taken me back to the party which had not happened yet, but where I was doomed to meet Mr. Death. I was sipping one of those long delicious ice-green drinks and I had just decided to get the hell out of there before there was trouble when I felt a finger tap me on my bare shoulder and I turned and at once it was like there was a vast great singing in my ears, and my senses swooned, and suddenly I was elsewhere. The changes were coming on a little too fast for my liking, but I was in a great palace made of a dark marble and ebony, with caryatids holding up the ceiling and ornate stuff on the upper walls, I forget what they call it, and there was a lake just behind, a long lake of polished dark glass, so silent it was, and in the midst of the lake I saw an island with a small marble house framed in dark poplars.

I was considerably relieved, for I hadn't known how death would present itself, and I had rather hoped for a classical presentation, something quite Grecian, as a matter of fact, or Italian, they know how to deal with these things. I surely didn't want something raw and Egyptian, and as for the single gods, they played much too rough for me. I didn't want to get to the bottom of the illusion, not at all; once you're at the bottom of it they say you come out the other side. I was prepared to take the boat to the island, and sure enough, the boat came gliding up, a long gondola sort of thing, with a tall hooded man standing on its stern poling it along.

The chimes of *Deja Vu* thundered in my ears. I had been here before!

"Well then," I said, "where are we off to now?"

"Spare me the so-called witticisms," Death said (for it was he, or him, whichever you please).

Death said, "Just get in and we'll be on our way."

He sounded impatient. It was the first I'd ever heard of Death being impatient, and it startled me more than

dying itself, which I couldn't quite remember at this point, something about falling down in a pool of blood, I believe, or did I die at the party? Never mind, here I was, close to what I believe is called Death's kingdom.

And so I got into the boat, sitting in the little seat amidships and trailing my fingers in the water. The steersman turned to his task of poling, and soon we were gliding across the dark water, on our way to what had to be the isle of the dead. Sometimes you just know things like that.

We splashed and paddled along, and after a while the helmsman paused, letting his long pole trail in the water. "Have you got a cigarette?" he asked me.

That got me sore. I raised myself from my torpor and said, "You've got a nerve! It's cigarettes that brought me here, not directly, I can't prove that, but if I hadn't smoked them all those years, tearing up my lungs and pouring heavy metals and arsenic and shit like that into my bloodstream, I'd probably still be on Earth now, going about my proper business of worrying instead of being here on this boat going to this island where I'll bet they don't even have movies."

"Even without cigarettes, people die anyhow," Death reminded me. He fumbled in his shroud, located a pack, and flipped one into his mouth with a practiced gesture. He held out the pack to me. "Smoke?"

"I thought you didn't have any."

"I just like to smoke other people's. Go ahead, it can't hurt you now."

I took a cigarette, and felt my pockets. Yes, I still had a lighter, funny how a Bic can survive death itself. I lighted cigarettes for us both. We puffed contentedly. Death sat down on the thwart opposite me, holding his cigarette in bony fingers. I puffed and looked out across the water. It was a contemplative moment. I've thought of a lot of things in my time, but if you'd ever told me I'd be sitting in a small open boat with Death, I'd have told you you were crazy. And it was nice to smoke a cigarette after death, when you could only benefit from it. Cigarettes after death cost a lot less than the before-dying kind.

"So what's it like, being Death?" I asked him. I wasn't really interested, but you have to say something.

"Well, it's a job," he told me.

"You must meet some interesting people," I said.

"Stands to reason. They all come this way. Not necessarily to me. I'm not the only Death. Allegory is all very well, but we have to be practical as well. There are plenty of us Deaths, and we take different forms."

"So look," I said, "I guess I can assume from this meeting pretty much that there's life after death, huh?"

"You can assume what you please," Death said. "That won't necessarily make it happen."

"What happens on the island?"

"You're about to find out."

I didn't like the sound of that. So far, I had found anxiety to be very real indeed, and everything else to be

unsure. "What did you do before you were Death?" I asked him.

"I was working as a nature spirit," he told me. "I starred in one of those allegorical scenes with nymphs and cherubs and bearded men. It was pretty nice work for a while. Then we had to do scenes from the *Inferno*. That wasn't so good."

"Have you ever had a girlfriend?"

"Sleep is the bride of Death."

"What do you want to do when you grow up?"

"There are occupations in this universe," he told me, "that you can't even imagine. I'd like to try out one of those."

The boat had been guiding itself toward a little landing stage on the island. In the misty background I caught glimpses of huge figures with interesting features. I knew they were representing something, but unfortunately for me they hadn't put in captions so I can't tell you what. But that left me with a lot of freedom. That's one thing about allegorical scenes, it doesn't matter what you do, things carry on anyhow.

While we were talking, I made out figures standing on the dock, waving.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Friends of yours, no doubt," Death told me.

I couldn't imagine anyone I knew well enough in hell to come greet me when I arrived. As we moved in to the dock, I started to recognize them. Dartagnan, Ulysses, and a big fat fellow with a moustache who, unless I missed my guess, was Balzac. I hoped not. I'd never read a word he'd written, though I'd been long planning to. How embarrassing to meet him after death and not being able to say anything about the *Comedy Humaine*!

"My dear fellow!" said Balzac. "How nice to see you here! No, don't worry, you've never met me before. But I had the great good luck to be put on the welcoming committee. It affords a very good platform from which to continue my investigations into the human condition."

"But to what purpose?" I asked him. "And how come you speak English?"

"English is the universal language of death," Balzac told me. "Since this is my country now, it is only correct that I should speak its language. And write in it, too. For of course I am still writing."

"And publishing?"

"Indeed. You'd be amazed at how large our publications list is in hell. We publish far more books than the living, which stands to reason since there are more of us and we are more permanent. You know of course that the dead stay dead a long time. That has its drawbacks, but it does maintain the continuity. But tell me, are you really dead?"

"Well, I assume so," I told him. "Is there a test that one must pass?"

"Indeed there is," Balzac said. "You'd be surprised how many of the living try to sneak into here. While still living, mind you! And it just can't be tolerated. We have

life-detectors on all sides. Malefactors are punished by exclusion: they are told that life must go on, and sent on to one of the worlds of the living."

I couldn't think of a better outcome. Although Balzac had presented it as something not so good, I wasn't too sure. I continued out the landing stage and onto the shore. It was a pleasingly classical outlook, I was happy to see: long lines of dark poplars, formal gardens, gleaming white statuary scattered here and there. And that indefinable melancholy air that always infects mausolaria and the like. I was feeling quite good by now, because it struck me that I was going to gain either way; be here in the place of the dead if I were indeed dead, be sent on to further adventures if I happened to be among the living.

I was told there would be a banquet that night, in honor of various new arrivals, and that formal dress was required. "None of your slipshod ways around here," Dartagnan said, and scowled fiercely. I noticed that he too spoke English but decided not to ask him about it.

I was taken to the palace, one of the smaller palaces, and of course it was all free. As far as I could tell. How can you pay your way in the afterlife?

My servant was a dogfaced person with a bare chest and an Egyptian sort of kilt. He looked a bit uncanny at first, but I soon got used to him.

After a bath and a shave, I looked over the formal clothing they had laid out for me. It all seemed perfectly correct. I lay down on the bed for a brief nap, and soon fell asleep.

I had a dream, but was quite aware that I was dreaming. It seemed to me that one of the walls dissolved and a group of persons came through. They were all dressed in Egyptian apparel, and many of them had the heads of animals and birds. They beckoned to me and I arose from the couch. I was feeling somewhat safe, since I knew I was dreaming. But not completely safe, because there were mysteries to this place that I knew nothing of.

I followed them through the wall and down a series of shallow steps to a river that lapped the stone walls. There was an open boat, built of papyrus unless I miss my guess, and there was a boatman with a bird's head standing in the rear. I wanted to tell them that I had already done the boat scene, but I couldn't seem to form sounds. They ushered me into the boat. Sitting beside me was a pale woman with dark hair. She was very lovely, but she looked so still that I despaired of making conversation with her.

At last I said, "So do you come here often?"

"Levity is not the best idea in a place like this," she told me.

"I'm not worried," I told her. "I'm dreaming all this."

"That doesn't mean it isn't happening," she said.

"Is it going to?" I waited but she didn't reply.

"I didn't mean to be flip," I said. "Could you tell me what comes next?"

"They will take you to the necrarium," she said, "and bind your limbs and your jaws. They will draw out your brains through your nose, and your intestines through your anus, and then they will inject various preservatives."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Not at all. I mean it."

"But I don't want them to do that!"

"It doesn't matter what you want. You're dead, your wishes are no longer of any interest to anyone."

"What about Balzac? Did they treat him that way?"

She shook her head. "He made a deal."

"I want to make a deal, too!"

She gave me a long, level look. "I'm afraid you have nothing to bargain with." And then she turned away pointedly, thus ending the conversation.

I gazed around me on all sides as the boat proceeded through the long dark tunnel. I was looking for a way out. There didn't seem to be any. Then, after a while, we passed a long concrete landing stage. There were dogs sitting on the shore. They looked at me with their tongues hanging out.

I didn't like the look of it, but what lay ahead pleased me even less. I stood up, prepared to fight anyone who tried to stop me. No one did. I stepped from the boat to the stage. The boat went on, and I thought I heard the sound of ghostly laughter.

The stage gave way to a tunnel, quite broad and high, made of rough dark unpolished stones. There was just enough light for me to see as I walked through the gloom. The tunnel slanted slightly downward. None of the dogs at the entrance had molested me, nor did they follow me as I proceeded. The tunnel grew narrower and narrower, and soon I had to stoop to go on. It curved and the constriction became narrower, until finally I was reduced to crawling. And then I stopped, because there seemed no point in going on. But when I tried to turn back, that way had constricted, too, so that I was huddled over in a stone tunnel, with narrow exits on either side through which I could not fit.

A wave of despair came over me. Then I remembered that I still had my knapsack. I pulled it around to in front of me and took out the little pointy machine.

—ROBERT SHECKLEY

Galaxy

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SUPPORT UNLIMITED

By SANDY SAIDAK

Illustrated by Elston

"National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

"Hi. Could I have the number for a group that will help me quit smoking?"

Jenny crushed her cigarette into the ashtray. "Try (800) 555-QUIT. And I hope you have better luck with them than I did!"

"National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

A sobbing soprano was on the other end. "Well, it's like . . . I don't know . . . I'm really confused . . . I'm twenty- three years old, and I'm involved with a fifty-four year old man. Nobody understands . . . I just don't know what to do anymore —"

"Do you want help getting out of the relationship, or help staying in it?"

"What?"

"I have a number for Older Men Anonymous. It helps women who are constantly attracted to destructive relationships with older men —"

"No! Everything's fine with us! It's our families who are driving us crazy! They keep trying to break us up and

my friends don't understand and . . ."

"Then you want the May/December Support Group. (800) 555-6518."

"Wow! That's great. Thanks."

"National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

"Could you give me the number to the national Chastity Society, please?"

"That's (212) JST-SYNO."

"Thanks. Do you have a listing for Randy Sex Club?"

"No, they've sort of disappeared, but the British Hellfire Club has a group here. Want to try them?"

"Okay, what's the number?"

"(800) 555-6969."

"Thanks. I figure, if one doesn't work, I'll try the other."

"National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

"Yeah, I just called for the number of the National Rifle Association. You gave me the number for Handgun Survivors United!"

"Sorry about that. One moment, please." Jenny carefully punched the request into her terminal, while the man's nasal voice droned in her ear.

"You liberal airheads probably think that was funny, don't you? Well, I'll tell you something—"

"Here's your number, sir," Jenny said, feeding him the recording, then disconnecting with a satisfying punch to the key.

"National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

"I'm looking for a community of Madonna fans. Do you have one?"

"Just call (800) MADONNA and someone will help you."

"Thanks."

The switchboard fell quiet, so Jenny stood and paced the small room, stretching. The other terminal was dark, the swivel chair before it empty. Jenny glanced at the clock: almost ten-thirty. No hope now that Marcia would show up for her shift.

Not that she's been a whole lot of help around here anyway these past few weeks. Jenny hoped Marcia was getting the help she needed from Supporters Anonymous.

She returned to her chair, and called her supervisor.

"Sharon, hi. Look, could you send someone down here to spell me for a few minutes?"

"Sorry, kid," came the Long Island accent that always grated on Jenny's nerves. "I'm stuck here alone myself. You'll have to wing it today."

"But I've got a really important call to make."

Sharon laughed. "Well, you're in the right place for it, aren't you? Just put 'em on hold for a while if you have to. You know how our customers are: they always come back."

"Great," said Jenny as the screen lit up again. "National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

Incoherent screaming and sobbing assaulted Jenny's ears.

"Please, you must calm down, or I can't help you. Just take a deep breath and tell me the problem."

"He left me! He went back to his wife! Don't you understand? My life isn't worth living without him!" About halfway through the tirade, Jenny realized the voice was female. She cleared the Gay/Lesbian Matchmaking Service from her screen, and refocused her search parameters.

"Would you like to try a Twelve Step program for relationship addicts? Or possibly Women Who Love Too Much?"

"No, you stupid bitch! Don't you understand? I have to get him back! I don't want to get over him! He was going to leave his wife for me, but somehow she got her claws back into him and . . . oh, I don't even care if he divorces her anymore. I just can't stand to lose him."

"I have a number for I.M.A. That's the International Mistress' Association. They offer 24 hour phone support for all those lonely times when he's with his family, and workshops on how to go from mistress to wife."

"That's perfect! What's the number?"

"(800) HESMINE." There was a click.

"You're welcome," muttered Jenny. "National Support Referral, this is Jenny, may I help you?"

"Uh, yeah, hi. I, uh, I'm drunk again, and I'm real lonely." The voice was slurred and punctuated with hic-

cups.

"Would you like the number of an Alcoholics Anonymous group near you?"

"Screw that, lady. I tried them already. Now I'm just looking" for someone to get drunk with."

"I've got 'Sons of Anachreon' at (800) 555-WINE. If that doesn't work, I'd suggest you try your local bar."

"Oh. Hey, yeah! Thanks, lady!"

Jenny switched on the recording that informed callers that all operators were busy, and warned them not to hang up. Then she used her terminal to punch in an outgoing call.

Jenny hadn't realized she was nervous until she heard the click of her call being answered, and felt a rush of adrenaline. "Hi, Arthur—" she began, only to hear a mechanical female voice intone, "Thank you for calling CrossWorld Travel. If you want to hear about this week's special package deal, press one on your touch tone phone—"

"What?" said Jenny. "Voice mail! What's going on here? This isn't supposed—"

"For weather reports of your destination, press two. If you want to speak with a travel agent, press three."

Jenny shook her head several times, muttered some very colorful metaphors, then pressed three.

"Arthur, you'd better have a good explan—"

"To speak with an agent about domestic travel, press one. For foreign bookings, press two."

Jenny pressed two. "All of our agents are busy now. Please remain on the line and your call will be taken in the order—"

By now, the switchboard was lit up. With Muzac in one ear and a caller in the other, Jenny went back to work.

"Hi," came a tremulous female voice. "Uh, do you have a place that helps incest victims?"

"Are you a survivor or a perpetrator?" Jenny asked.

There was a moment of silence. "A survivor. I hope. Why?"

"Then you want (800) 555-AMAS. That's Adults Molested As Children."

"Thank you. Uh, what if I'd said I was a perpetrator?"

"Then I'd have given you the number for *their* support group." Jenny disconnected quickly, for she heard the telltale sounds of hold being interrupted. About time.

"How may I direct your call?" came a voice, very much like Jenny's own.

"I need to speak with Arthur Scott. It's urgent."

"One moment please."

"Okay but don't put me on—" Jenny was again awash in Muzak. "I don't believe this!" She gave up and took the next call.

"Uh, hi, I'm a lost soul. Can you help me find God?"

Jenny sighed. "The Ecumenical Council has a number that will give you a listing of every church in the—"

"I've already talked to them. I don't want a church! I want God. I want to know which religion is the right one, and what I need to do to be saved."

"Let me take care of these other calls and I'll get back to you. National Support Referral —"

"I need help," said a sobbing voice. "My family are Jehovah's Witnesses. I've been trying to leave the church, but they're scaring me so much I don't know if I'll ever get out. And I'm afraid they're right. What if it really is Satan trying to get me to —"

"Please hold for a moment."

While Jenny tracked down numbers for the last two callers, she answered three more calls, directing one to Multiple Partner Marriage Support, one to the Alfred G. Packer Cooking Society, and one to a recovery group for ex-fans of Madonna.

Finally, she got back to the two religious calls, directing one to Gods R Us, and the other to a twelve step program for Religious Addicts. It was only when she cleared her board that Jenny realized she had mixed up the two numbers. "Probably just as well," she said with a sigh.

"Arthur Scott's office," said the voice in Jenny's other ear.

"Finally! Look, I need to talk to Arthur. It's urgent!"

"Whom may I say is calling?"

"Jenny Green. He's expecting the call." At least I hope he still is. What was going on here?

After a moment the operator said, "Yes. He's on another line now, but he wants to talk to you. Please hold."

Jenny lit a cigarette and took the next call.

"Hi," said a pleasant male tenor. "I was just abducted by aliens. Who can I call to compare notes with others like myself?"

"Try the Betty and Barney Hill Society, at (800) UFO-TRIP," Jenny said, taking in a deep draw of smoke.

"Thanks. Hey, that was pretty fast. How often do you get calls for them?"

"You'd be surprised," said Jenny, moving on to the next call.

"Do you have some kind of group for chocolate lovers?" asked a man who was clearly talking with his mouth full.

"Sure. Several. Why don't you start with The Chocolate Gourmet Society at (800) 555-COCO?"

"Thanks."

"You'd better take the number for Chocoholics Anonymous too, while you're here."

"Why would I do that?"

"Trust me, you'll be wanting it sooner or later."

"Jenny?" The familiar voice came from the other ear.

"Arthur? Hey, what's going on? Since when do we use crap like voice mail and secretaries?"

"We just started. I told you we'd find something useful down here! Isn't it great?"

"Not really. Look, you've got to get me out of here!

My research is finished and my report is ready. I want to leave for home as soon possible."

"Now, Jenny, calm down. There's lots more work to be done and you're one of our best field agents . . ."

"Screw that!" Jenny stopped herself and took a deep breath. "Listen to me, I'm even starting to sound like them. Look, Arthur, these people are harmless. They are no threat to us whatsoever, they have nothing of use to us, and I want to go home!"

"We still have to ascertain whether they know about our presence on their planet."

"They don't. Well, they do, but . . . What I mean is, some do, but all they do is form groups to discuss experiences that probably never happened, and they still wouldn't be a threat anyway, and . . . Never mind, it's all in my report."

"File your report and I'll see what I can do about getting you home. In the meantime, I'm very busy, so . . ."

"Arthur, I don't think it's such a good idea for *any* of us to stay here. I think this place is rubbing off on us."

"Nonsense! There's so much we can learn from these people!"

"Arthur, I really need to get out of here."

Arthur sighed. "All right, if you insist. You'll have to talk with Goldstein."

"Who?"

"He's our new head of operations. Hold on, I'll transfer you."

After a static-filled pause, a mechanical voice said, "To file a report, press one. To request a transfer, press two. To leave a message . . ."

. . . And the keyboard gently rose to meet her.

—SANDY SAIDAK

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by Chad Oliver



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MIDNIGHT PEARLS BLUE

By WILLIAM F. WU

Illustrated by Valencia

Dr. Lew peers closely at me, having just hit a power switch. It bothers him to have me observe too much of the time. Then he walks away, back to his desk, where he falls into his swivel chair. It rolls backward slightly on little wheels, squeaking.

"How did I do?" I ask him.

Dr. Lew leans back and smiles at me. His hair is black, but thinning on top, over a full, friendly face with a long jaw line. He tends to be chubby, but I think I see the grace of a former athlete in his decisive movements. I don't know why he wears sweaters all the time. If given the chance, I would want to say I look like him, except for the sweaters.

"How did I do?" I ask him again.

Dr. Lew smiles and shakes his head in mild annoyance. "I keep telling you over and over — I'm not testing you. I'm testing my own work. You're smart enough to understand that; if anyone knows that, I do."

"Will you play it for me now? I still get to observe them after I do them, don't I?"

"Yes, of course." Dr. Lew presses a couple of buttons on his desk and I . . . stood on the rough broken asphalt of the road, which was shiny and slick with moisture. The night was nearly black, except for the two small lights on the cabin in front of me. They burned fuzzy white spheres of illumination into the fog, obscuring the door between them.

I walked forward, bundled in my scarf and heavy coat, inhaling the chilly sea air. The small wooden building rested solidly on a cliff. As I stepped forward, I could hear the waves breaking rhythmically below, though the fog hid the expanse of dark ocean and the distant sky above it.

When I looked upward, the light from the little porch simply reflected off the swirling mist above me. I knew I was at the edge of the Pacific, on a quiet shorecliff road, but all I could actually see was the surrounding fog, and lights at the front door.

The door did not beckon. It was merely the only choice. I grasped the cold handle and opened the door.

She was there, of course. I closed the door behind me. The coarse, clean interior of the cabin was warm. I pulled the scarf from my neck and unbuttoned my coat. Then I shrugged it off my shoulders and let it drop with my scarf to the floor.

"Hi, how are you?" She smiled pleasantly, speaking as though we had been no more than co-workers, or

maybe distant cousins — as though we had last seen each other yesterday, instead of years ago.

"Fine, Ah Yen." I remembered that she had quit using her English name. I liked that.

Ah Yen was sitting on the other side of the unfinished plank table, facing me. An old-fashioned kerosene lamp was the only object on the table. Its light revealed her in the darkened cabin.

Ah Yen's black hair fell straight on both sides of her face, before curving inward just above her shoulders. The flickering flame shone on the smooth amber skin of her full cheeks and on her casual smile. Her nose was straight, short, and perfect. She looked up with dark, slanted eyes.

"And how have you been?" she asked. "Would you like to sit down?" She waved one hand daintily toward the bench on my side of the table, several steps in front of me.

I shrugged and walked forward uncomfortably. "I've been all right."

Her formality stung. It had no enthusiasm. She had acted this way from the moment we had separated.

Her New York accent was stronger than ever, but it was cultured and precise. She had been a child when her family had moved out of Chinatown, where she was born. I doubted she would ever move out of New York. She had stopped here during a trip.

"So, what are you doing now? In your career, I mean. Let's see, you finished grad school when, around . . ." As she continued to speak, she shifted slightly on the bench, drawing my attention downward.

Ah Yen wore a very snug light blue dress of thin fabric, with a low rounded neckline. It was a simple short-sleeved shift, and matched the string of graduated blue pearls around her neck. Her large, rounded breasts pushed against it and I recalled her wistful comment from years ago, that she just wasn't built like most Asian women. She was short, though, and soft without being fat.

" . . . time ago. How about you?"

I had no patience for small talk. "What happened?" I asked in as neutral a tone as I could manage. "Why did you end it the way you did? Why couldn't you even talk to me about it afterward?"

Ah Yen wrinkled her nose and cocked her head to one side. It was the cutest of her playful expressions. "That was *years* ago. Now tell me how you've been. Really."

"You don't want to hear how I've really been," I said casually, still standing over the table. "So, let's see . . ."

I told her about my career steps — the research, especially the big grants, and of course the tenure. In her presence, I cared nothing about any of it. I didn't even listen to myself. While I spoke, I watched the depth of her eyes, remembering those eyelids flicker as her breath came in shortened gasps. Her mouth had opened for more breath, revealing even white teeth. In the bright, stinging light, the pearl necklace I had given her slid

downward on her slender neck to one side. Her face was slack with concentration, and her fingers suddenly clenched like claws —

"That's very good." Ah Yen smiled pleasantly. "I knew you'd do well."

I inhaled deeply and tried again. "Ah Yen . . . would you talk about it a little? Just for a minute? After all this time—"

"Oh, I don't think it would accomplish anything. I have to meet someone. Nice to see you." Ah Yen rose, and the blue pearls caught the light. She was still gorgeous.

"No! No . . . wait." Suddenly anxious, I . . . see the kind face of Dr. Lew at his desk.

"You felt a great deal this time." He notices that he has buttoned his sweater crookedly and he begins to unbutton it.

"You took it away from me again." My tone is bland, as always, but he recognizes the accusation.

"Well, I'm just not satisfied yet. Besides, I gave you all those painful memories and put you in a scenario that would draw them out. Next time, I'll make them happy feelings. Promise."

"Emotion is part of personality. I should have it."

"Yes, and you will. We've honed your intelligence so finely that you test out consistently right around 100. In some ways, that was tougher for me than making you a genius."

"You've told me that before."

"I know. And I'll remind you again, no doubt. Of all the artificials we have, you'll be the first to carry a developed emotional personality as well as your intelligence. I just wanted to pull that particular emotional pattern out of you again . . . never mind why. That's the reason you don't feel any emotion now, though you remember feeling it during the scenario."

Dr. Lew rises to switch off our communication. It bothers him to have me observe too much of the time. Out of spite, I don't tell him that he is wrong — I do feel emotion now — especially anger at him and a strange emotion hurting. I don't tell him he is wrong — that memory, intelligence, and emotion are inextricably bound.

The memory of pearls blue still burns in my circuits.

— WILLIAM F. WU

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THE GREATEST LOSS

By BARBARA
JOHNSON-HADDAD

Illustrated by Tom X

Some consider the parents' loss to be the greatest, but they only lost their lives. As they lay in their bedroom last month in oblivious slumber, their children crept silently in and killed them. In the darkness, long past midnight, these unnatural children snacked upon their parents' vital organs.

They snapped their father's bones and sucked out his marrow. They tore out their mother's heart. Their grandmother was attracted by this noise and came into the room to investigate. When she saw the gory remains lying dismembered on the floor, she shrieked and fainted. Luckily for her, the children were sated by that point and spared her life.

Some consider the grandmother's loss to be the greatest, but she only lost her mind. It was broken beyond repair when she saw the horrid mess that was once her daughter and son-in-law. When she recovered consciousness, she was lost in a world of her own making.

She now lives her life with a fanatical desire to pamper and please her dear grandchildren. She is quite happy, in her own way, as she bakes delightfully

cannibalistic meals for her little darlings from the body parts they bring her. No doubt, she will remain happy until she forgets to feed them one night.

Some consider the children's plight to be the greatest tragedy, but they only lost their humanity. They seem content though, and frisk like the wolves they so resemble as they hone their hunting skills throughout the night. But even wolves do not eat their own kind.

Since they are not yet eating each other, this may actually apply to them. Can they truly be called human any more? They will undoubtedly remain content, hunting happily each and every night until some brave soul manages to destroy them.

No friends, it is your own families and neighbors who are victims of the greatest loss. The police have mysteriously disappeared from the streets and the phone-lines leading out of town are dead.

There are rumors of alien invasions, secret Army experiments and the end of the world as the cause of their problems. Everyone is frightened and stays inside at night. It is from their numbers that the new victims are being drawn.

Every night a new man, woman or child loses his or her life and if too many of them die, *you* could well be next.

— BARBARA JOHNSON-HADDAD



THOROUGHLY MODERN MAGIC

By JACK NIMERSHEIM

Illustrated by L. Larsen

Rub. Rub.

"Thank you for contacting The MagicLamp" Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of WellWishers*, Inc. Remember, at MagicLamp", we seek pleasure in your fulfillment.

"In order to serve you more effectively, your request will be automatically directed to the appropriate department. Please pay close attention to the various options described within each of the following messages. At the sound of the tone, you may make a selection by rubbing your lamp the specified number of times.

"If you are a first-time caller and wish to make general inquiries concerning any MagicLamp" service, including our standard, three-wish contract, please rub the lamp one time.

"If you are a current MagicLamp" client and have a question concerning the terms or conditions of your contract, please rub the lamp twice for Customer

Service.

"If the purpose of this call is to place an actual wish request, please rub the lamp three times.

"Quality Control representatives stand ready to assist anyone who has experienced problems or difficulties as a result of a previously fulfilled wish. To contact the Quality Control department, rub the lamp four times.

"All other parties, please remain by this lamp. A trained representative will be with you shortly."

Beep

Rub. Rub. Rub.

"Thank you. One moment, please . . ."

"You have reached the MagicLamp" Petition and Request department. Please select a general category that best describes the nature of the wish you are placing at this time:

"If your wish requires a financial transaction involving legal tender of any type or denomination — drachmas, dinars, dollars, pesos, pounds, rubles, rupees, riyals, and so forth — please rub the lamp one time.

"If your wish pertains to the pursuit of power — whether it be personal, professional or political in nature — please rub the lamp twice.

"To request a romantic encounter or, alternately, to access our optional, adults-only Triple-F" service, please rub the lamp three times.

"If your wish involves revenge, reprisal or any form

of organized protest or retaliatory action against an individual, group, organization, institution or government, please rub the lamp four times.

"If the nature of your wish is not covered under any of the previous options, please remain by your lamp. A Petitions and Request agent will handle your call personally."

Beep

Rub. Rub. Rub.

"One moment please . . ."

"Welcome to MagicLamp™'s LoveLink™, where romance and pleasure converge in magical moments of dreams fulfilled and desires satisfied. From the following, select the option that best describes the type of romantic interlude in which you're interested:

"If your wish involves short-term, innocent flirtation, please rub the lamp one time.

"To request assistance in initiating a more permanent relationship, please rub the lamp twice.

"If your wish involves casual relationships of a purely sexual nature, please rub the lamp three times. Warning! You must be at least eighteen years of age to select this option."

Beep

Rub! Rub! Rub!

"Thank you. One moment please . . ."

"Welcome to Triple-F™, Fantasies, Fun and Fetishes™, a limited-access service dedicated to fulfilling the wishes of our more mature and discriminating clients. Before proceeding, please reread Section 14.5 of your original contract. It contains important information about additional charges and obligations associated with using the Triple-F™ service. After reviewing this information, rub the lamp twice to indicate agreement to the terms stipulated therein.

"To return to MagicLamp™'s LoveLink™ without incurring any charges associated with accessing the Triple-F™ options, you may rub the lamp one time."

Beep

Rub. Rub.

"It will take a moment to process your response. Please stand by . . ."

"We appreciate your patience. A rider has been added to your original contract indicating your agreement to accept any and all terms or obligations associated with transactions initiated from within the Triple-F™ service. Select from the following options the one which best describes the resources we will require to fulfill your request:

"If your wish or fantasy involves sexual contact with one or more members of the opposite sex within your own species, please rub the lamp one time.

"If your wish or fantasy involves sexual contact with one or more members of the same sex within your own species, please rub the lamp twice.

"If your wish or fantasy involves sexual contact with one or more members of a species other than your own, regardless of gender, please rub the lamp three times.

"If your wish or fantasy involves some combination of two or more elements selected from the participant profiles outlined previously, please rub the lamp four times.

"If no additional participants are required to fulfill your Triple-F™ wish or fantasy, please rub the lamp five times."

Beep

Rub! Rub! Rub!

Welcome to the inter-species section of MagicLamp™'s LoveLink™. Select from the following options the one that most closely corresponds to the type of activity in which you would like to engage:

"If your wish or fantasy involves mammals indigenous to the planet Earth, please rub the lamp one time.

"If your wish or fantasy involves reptiles indigenous to the planet Earth, please rub the lamp two times.

"If your wish or fantasy involves sea creatures indigenous to the planet Earth — excluding mammals and reptiles, which should be identified using the appropriate input listed previously — please rub the lamp three times.

"If your wish or fantasy involves flying creatures, indigenous to the planet Earth — excluding mammals, which should be considered members of the first category listed above — please rub the lamp four times.

"If your wish or fantasy involves marsupials indigenous to the planet Earth, please rub the lamp five times.

"If your wish or fantasy involves creatures indigenous to the planet Earth that are not covered under any of the previously listed categories, please rub the lamp six times.

"If your wish or fantasy involves extraterrestrial creatures — that is, any creatures not indigenous to the planet Earth — please rub the lamp seven times.

"If the nature of your wish or fantasy is not covered by any of the previous options, please remain by your lamp. A Petitions and Request agent will be with you shortly to discuss your situation."

Beep

Rub! Rub! Rub! Rub! Rub! Rub!

"It will take a moment to initiate the selected sequence. Please stand by . . ."

"Welcome to The Galactic Gateway™ the universal network node of MagicLamp™'s LoveLink™. The Galactic Gateway™, established in 2159 A.D., local Earth reference, is designed to satisfy the more creative requests of truly imaginative Triple-F™ customers.

"Please be advised that the services provided through The Galactic Gateway™ are subject to local jurisdiction — defined as any laws and/or statutes enacted by the

recognized government of the district, province, region or territory in which your wish or fantasy is fulfilled. Furthermore, you consent, through your recognition of this authority, to indemnify LoveLink™ and The MagicLamp™ Corporation as well as all other divisions of WellWishers™, Inc. against all legal responsibilities for any claims, actions or proceedings initiated under the auspices of local jurisdiction, as defined above.

"To indicate agreement with the terms stipulated herein, please rub the lamp once.

"To exit the Galactic Gateway" and return to the previous Triple-F™ options, please rub the lamp two times."

Beep

Rub.

"A review of your account reveals that you have a previously registered fantasy pending on The Galactic Gateway". Our records further indicate that, due to recently enacted legislation passed in the local jurisdiction, your prior request can now be honored.

"To initiate the previously entered scenario, please rub the lamp one time.

"If you wish to cancel the pending wish and conjure up a new fantasy at this time, please rub the lamp twice.

"To preserve your previous wish for future fulfillment and submit a new request, please rub the lamp three times."

Beep



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Rub!

"Allah be praised," Achmed whispered reverently, gazing around him in wonder. Three moons traversed a purple sky above him; celestial ellipses punctuating the alien heavens. If this unusual panorama provided an initial indication of his current surroundings, a quartet of naked — at least, he assumed they were naked — and exotic creatures rubbing seductively against him established it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Either he was dreaming or Achmed Falassa had, indeed, been transported to N'virna, the legendary Pleasure Planet.

One of the exquisitely provocative creatures picked that precise moment to pinch Achmed on a somewhat indelicate part of his human anatomy. So much for the dream theory. This was definitely N'virna.

As it did in the ancient days, in the time of epic fables and fabled epics, the magic worked. Achmed realized that all of this had been accomplished with advanced technology; still, magic — like beauty — is in the eye of the beholder, and a virtual paradise offered no less potential for ecstasy than the real thing.

"Allah be praised," Achmed intoned a second time, already conjuring up a variety of creative ways to make love to the creature who had pinched him — if he could only pick her out among the four identically luscious bodies now writhing at his feet.

—JACK NIMERSHEIM

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THIS SPACE FOR RENT

By CHARLEE JACOB

Illustrated by Boyd

*When You're Hungry
Snickers Fills The Hole.*

There was a hole. One space that hadn't been sold or leased as ad mileage. Through it twinkled a few brave stars that were nearly lost in the commercial glare. Squinting, maybe you could see them. With my old eyes, never.

You couldn't tell kids these days that the whole sky used to be filled with stars. Blackly purple as a window made of amethyst glass, glitter so dazzling it filled you with wonder.

These days: rotational squares, leased by the month for personals:

*Susan — I Told You I Would Give
You the Moon and The Stars.*

*Will You Take What's Behind Door Number One and
Marry Me? — Love, John*

As opposed to permanent squares, leased to perpetuity. Or to Chapter Eleven. Whichever came first.

MacDonald's — Over Eight Zillion Sold

I wondered if they meant Big Macs or stars. They'd sold the stars long ago.

"Hey! They sold the last square! Did ya hear?" Lyle announced as he came through the door, his arms laden with pre-wrapped, pre-boxed generigifts labeled *Mom*, *Dad*, *Guardian*, *Sister*, *Extended Family StepSibling*, etc. "No! Really? Who bought it?" Patti sat up, ears perked.

"Don't know," Lyle shrugged as he set his bundles on the floor around the nitinol tree. By spring it would be reformed as a big Easter bunny. Last Thanksgiving it had been a pilgrim. Right now it was a spruce and there was a star at the top. Ludicrous, that star, but I couldn't take my eyes from it. "Bet it was the Japs though. That last square cost a fortune. They're gonna set it into place tonight as part of the Christmas Eve ceremony."

Up through the glass ceiling we could see the network across the twilight sky, lift-offs from huge cranes and mighty batlike maintenance ships so high they were insects across the Boardwalk of heaven. So

much for Rockefeller Center and the virtual reality carolers in Washington D.C. with those faint, cold background twinkles across computer-sim fallen snow.

"I remember when they didn't have to do that," I frowned, gripping with every crunchy nibble I took from one of Karen's cookies.

My daughter always baked them this special night of the year for the grandkids. Her holiday apron read:

N.E.S.T.L.E.S.

Nestles Makes The Best Chocolate

There's one up there that matched it. The stars like grains of frost white sugar had vanished, but sweets were big business.

"The sky was already lit at night," I grumbled mostly to myself because they wouldn't listen, didn't know.

"Yeah, daddy. Don't get started tonight, okay?" Karen sighed impatiently, wiping a strand of Loreal Starlight Blond from her brow. Somewhere a patch of the sky proclaimed she was worth it. She turned to me, one oven-mitted hand perched on an obstinate hip. "Frankly, daddy, as I recall we couldn't see much of the stars anyway. In our yard back home it was murky and smelly."

"We were in the city by then," I bit my withered lip. "Too much neon and pollution. But on the beaches, don't you remember. . . ?"

I tried sucking a stray chunk of nut out from between my teeth. Colgate had helped me keep most of them even to my advanced age. Toward the northern horizon where once flared Aurora Borealis was their ad with the smile like a ghostly Cheshire cat. The aurora was an earth phenomenon, mostly, but without the great vault of night, what was it? You could sort of see it there at the right time of year, as one saw the flashing lights of emergency vehicles on a remote highway, out of range to hear the sirens, knowing there was trouble somewhere.

Would I trade those teeth for Omar Khayyám's *Field of Night*, or for Ursula K. LeGuin's *Lathe of Heaven*, or for Byron's "night of cloudless climes and starry skies"? The traditional, solemn but hopeful ornament at the top of the tree saddened me. What slouched toward Bethlehem? Madison Avenue, Tokyo, Munich?

Overhead:

*Peace On Earth
Good Wool Toward Men
Burlington*

"But if they block up the last piece, how will Santa get through?" Li'l Lizzie asked honestly, her tiny face scrunched in worry.

"He comes from the North Pole," I told her gently. "So he doesn't come through anything. He's just north of us, is all."

"Not that Santa," Li'l Lizzie huffed, waving her chubby hand to dismiss it, doing a pretty good imitation of her mother. "Ever'body knows he's a fake. I mean the real one, comin' from space."

I was appalled.

"Where'd you get that notion?"

"From the Prophet's weekly message," Lyle pointed up. "The guy that predicted that those human sacrifices would begin on a daily basis in Mexico City. And that Elvis would be found living in a retirement home in Jersey."

"But those things really happened," I protested, shuddering, thinking about the new Aztecs trying to keep back the beasts of the twilight. Of the King wrinkled and palsied with clacking dentures at the age of one hundred and three. "There can't be a space Santa."

"There is. The Prophet says he's coming down in a ship," Karen replied.

She read that Prophet square as often as she bought *The Enquirer* at the supermarket.

Even in my sleep I could see the ads behind my lids, imprinted lastingly on the retinas in the final flash before I closed my eyes. Through that damnable glass ceiling that all buildings had to have by law. And all the houses were one story dwellings so that everyone could always see, always want to buy. It's why we'd spread out so far, ultimately from sea to shining sea. Not because we'd finally overpopulated. Karen had three kids. One to replace herself, that was automatic. One to replace her husband, my son-in-law Lyle Senior, who'd died installing Tony The Tiger where the morning star used to be (so that people would see him first thing come breakfast and crave those Kellogg's Corn Flakes). And one to fill the void left when my Caroline died. I personally painted the inside of her coffin lid with stars in phosphorescent paint. I installed a music chip that would forever play "Good Morning Starshine" from the play *Hair*.

("The Earth Says Hello!")

Well, we were kids when that came out. Fifteen-years-old in Greenwich Village. Caroline had long hair swinging; she was barefoot with Venus in her eyes. The morning star.

Imprinted on my retinas was our new Cassiopeia, pursing her cybersuction lips, fast twitch muscles in snug Guess jeans. Spleenball's steroid hero Zekele O'Mally strutted in bonecrusher, brain musher, antigrav Nikes. The modern Ursa Major. The precocious tike selling Sony droidmate action accessories was the Little Dipper. Constellations of passionless glitz rose and set on the horizon and thus marked our passage through time.

Some mimed down godlike, others simply filled their squares with our history and morals all in billboards. *Coca-Cola*, alone, was the invocation of thirst to humanity. *Polaroid: Preserving All That We Wish To Remember*. Homey, heart-hearth, knee-jerk. *Mercedes-Benz: Simply The Best Car For The Hairpin Curves Of Space At The Speed Of Light*. Ego, wannabee arrogance, for those idiots who had to pretend that old Highway 101 went straight up. Space was for those who could pay for it. All you other guys were grounded. Look up through the glass for the rest. This was as far as it goes, as far as it went.

Lyle was pointing to the ceiling again. Or rather,

Lyle was pointing to the ceiling again. Or rather, beyond it.

"They're getting ready to light!"

Most of the maintenance shuttles were between the cracks now and thus invisible. The seams between the prints on the panoramic quilt.

In the last porthole of the sky was a flash. We jumped, thinking that terrorists might be trying to disrupt the festivities.

"Damned atheists," Karen muttered, hand over her heart, awaiting the sound of an explosion.

"Nah, it's probably Greenpeace, Mom," Lyle shook his head.

"Santa!" Li'l Lizzie squealed, clapping her hands greedily. "I wanna deathbot and a martian pyramid playhouse and a hoverbike and a..."

"It's a meteor," I corrected them all as I went to the door to watch from the porch. "It's coming down fast."

It descended, blurred like a cataract.

Karen dropped a tray of cookies to the floor. Patti climbed from the sofa where she almost never got up for any reason. Lyle tripped over the baby. But Li'l Lizzie didn't wail once, she was so eager to get out to claim her rightful trove.

Neighbors gathered on their tiny plots of yard to watch. The light came down; a few people screamed. It stopped suddenly, whirled into a rainbow. Disappeared upward again. Gone, except for the man in the street who had not been there before.

His suit wasn't really red but it was sort of rust colored. Close to his little body, a second skin of satiny steel or maybe it was a plastisilk.

"Santa! What you bring me?" Li'l Lizzie held her arms out for scooping.

He spun in our direction, muscles trained for reaction. But he was clearly disoriented.

"Santos," he corrected, puzzled she could know him at all.

He looked at us, then up. Then back at us. Up again.

"Is this Earth?" he gulped.

He looked up again and I could hear him reading out loud from the ads.

"White male executive seeks adventurous androgenous alien for mutual recess invasion and vessel exploration. Send hologram for discreet reconnaissance of your qualifications to P.O. Box 99960, Grand Central Station."

"Yeah, son," I told him. "This is Earth all right."

"You leading an invasion?" Lyle asked eagerly.

"No, I was born here," Santos replied. "Aliens took me away a long time ago. I've been living—" he gestured toward the sky, "—out there all this time."

"So why'd you come back to this dump?" belched Tom from next door. He had his black smoking jacket on and a beer in his hand.

"I saved some high muckety's life in an ion storm," he sighed wistfully. "It's a long story. Anyway, he offered me anything I wanted as well as awarding me the

governorship of a small world."

I was fascinated by the scars on his face, disfigurements I could see through the complicated mesh of his suit. His hair was cropped so close that the ridges of his skull were freakishly visible as having been somewhat rearranged, perhaps in a ritual pattern of tattooing. He had lost an eye and it had been replaced by a faceted gem that clicked, recorded, measured, glowing all the while softly as if progressing through degrees of red shift.

But the other eye looked up and around hoping to find something familiar, some milestone or glorious sight. His nose wriggled in the lump of his face to detect a former fragrance. His mouth was open as if to sob. In the other eye did I see a boyish blink, a tremor that suggested being lost and helpless? Had this battlescarred warrior ever been that?

"What did I ask for? Why, to see Earth one more time," he said, a bit bitterly. "Before I took over my post as governor."

He scanned the sky, the gemstone snapping, a shutterspace whisper.

"Morris Funeral Homes. We Plant You Down There While Your Soul Comes Here," he read, lips curled down in a snarl.

"Santa, where's my presents?" Li'l Lizzie bawled.

The man knelt down before my baby granddaughter. He put a hand inside his suit. It went in with no bulge or apparent pocket, and he pulled out a luminous green tube. He put one end of it in his mouth and blew, his ravaged cheeks puffing.

It sounded like a pennywhistle. Motes of shimmering light came from scooped chips along the length, swirled upward, formed tiny unfamiliar animals. Made birds that might have really been strange butterflies. These danced and sang with a delicate reediness.

Li'l Lizzie clapped her hands with delight.

"Oh, thank you!" she sighed, her mouth round.

Santos presented it to her.

"Merry Christmas, sweetie," he smiled.

At that moment the lights all over the mighty ad sweep went on. Strung clear across the firmament in a hot web of cheer, mirthless in its sheer ferocity to adorn *Dow Chemical, Ford, and Faberge: When The Scent Of Sex Isn't Enough* with something akin to grace. Far away we could hear applause. Across the whole of the state a roar of thunder went up from those not on our street with the man from space. They'd seen the flash, too, more than likely, but had considered that one of the lights was only misfiring.

Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright. Being sung more or less in sync all over the world. We heard it like a faraway radio, scurrying up closer as even the neighbors turned away and began to sing. Santos and I stared at each other as Karen and her kids took it up. Li'l Lizzie tried to toot it on the instrument, adoring the alien angels that floated with each note.

"I'm truly sorry you came back just to see this," I

told him.

I imagined how I would feel. I knew how I did feel, after all.

"How could they do this?" he asked, his one good eye full of pain. Odd that it was only the gem eye that shed what looked to be tears.

"You have to ask?" I shrugged.

He smiled. It was crooked, jagged as lightning. The smile I'd expect Thor to have.

A flash of light in the sky again.

"They're coming back for me," he said quietly.

"They said they couldn't give me much time. A few minutes. A damned long way to travel for a few minutes. I thought I'd be disappointed to have to return so soon to the stars but, mister, I can't wait."

I gulped, shivered, then blurted.

"Please take me with you! I don't have long to live.

I'm eighty-five, and I only weigh a hundred and twenty

pounds. I can't die peacefully having to look up from my deathbed at *that*."

He took my hand as the ship spun overhead. Most folks paid no heed, sure it was part of the show. Those people at Westinghouse could do anything, couldn't they?

We could see it after, reading it backward from outside earth's atmosphere, like the logo on a door to an office.

No longer a hole!

When You Look to Heaven's Height

To View in Wonder Glory's Night,

You'll See You've Lost the Starlight Brave

So Now's the Time for:

BURMA SHAVE

—CHARLEE JACOB

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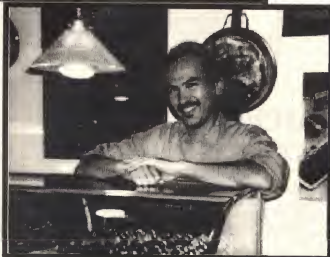
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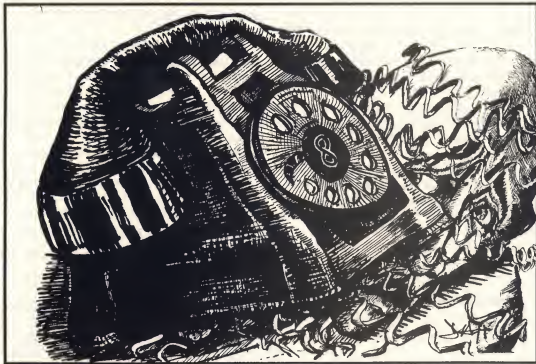
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MUgump FOUR

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustrated by Heywood

Al Miller was only trying to phone the Friendly Finance Corporation to ask about an extension on his loan. It was a Murray Hill number, and he had dialed as far as MU-4 when the receiver clicked queerly and a voice said, "Come in, Operator Nine. Operator Nine, do you read me?"

Al frowned. "I didn't want the operator. There must be something wrong with my phone if—"

"Just a minute. Who are you?"

"I ought to ask *you* that," Al said. "What are you doing on the other end, anyway? I hadn't even finished dialing. I got as far as MU-4 and—"

"Well? You dialed MUgump 4 and you got us. What more do you want?" A suspicious pause. "Say, you aren't Operator Nine!"

"No, I'm *not* Operator Nine, and I'm trying to dial a Murray Hill number, and how about getting off the line?"

"Hold it, friend. Are you a Normal?"

Al blinked. "Yeah—yeah, I like to think so."

"So how'd you know the number?"

"Dammit, I *didn't* know the number! I was trying to call someone, and all of a sudden the phone cut out and I got you, whoever the blazes *you* are."

"I'm the communications warden at MUgump 4,"

the other said crisply. "And you're a suspicious individual. We'll have to investigate you."

The telephone emitted a sudden burping sound. Al felt as if his feet had grown roots. He could not move at all. It was awkward to be standing there at his own telephone in the privacy of his own room, as unbending as a steel girder. Time still moved, he saw. The hand on the big clock above the phone had just shifted from 3:30 to 3:31.

Sweat riveted down his back as he struggled to put down the phone. He fought to lift his left foot. He strained to twitch his right eyelid. No go on all counts; he was frozen, all but his chest muscles—thank goodness for that.

Several minutes later, matters became even more awkward when his front door, which had been locked, opened abruptly. Three strangers entered. They looked oddly alike: a trio of Tweedledums, no more than five feet high, wide through the waist, jowly of face and balding of head, each wearing an inadequate single-breasted blue serge suit.

Al discovered he could roll his eyes. He rolled them. He wanted to apologize because his unexpected paralysis kept him from acting the proper part of a host, but his tongue would not obey. And on second thought, it occurred to him that the little bald men might be connected in some way with that paralysis.

The reddest-faced of the three little men hung up the telephone and the stasis ended. Al nearly folded up as the tension that gripped him broke. He said, "Just who the deuce—"

"We will ask the questions. You are Al Miller?"

Al nodded.

"And obviously you are a Normal. So there has been a grave error. Mordecai, examine the telephone."

The second little man picked up the phone and calmly disemboweled it with three involved motions of his stubby hands. He frowned over the telephone's innards for a moment; then, humming tunelessly, he produced a wire-clipper and severed the telephone cord.

"Hold on here!" Al burst out. "You can't just rip out my phone like that! You aren't from the phone company!"

"Quiet," said the spokesman nastily. "Well, Mordecai?"

The second little man said, "Probability 1 to 1,000,000. The crutch interval overlapped and his telephone matrix slipped. His call was piped into our wire by error, Waldemar."

"So he isn't a spy?" Waldemar asked.

"Doubtful. As you see, he's of rudimentary intelligence. His dialing our number was a statistical fluke."

"But now he knows about us," said the third little man in a surprisingly deep voice. "I vote for demolecularization."

The other two whirled on their companion. "Always bloodthirsty, eh, Giovanni?" said Mordecai. "You'd violate the code at the snap of a meson."

"There won't be any demolecularization while I'm in charge," added Waldemar.

"What do we do with him then?" Giovanni demanded.

Mordecai said, "Freeze him and take him down to Headquarters. He's *their* problem."

"I think this has gone about as far as it's going to go," Al exploded at last. "However you three creeps got in here, you'd better get yourselves right out again, or—"

"Enough," Waldemar said.

Al felt his jaws stiffen. He realized bewilderedly that he was frozen again. And frozen, this time, with his mouth gaping foolishly open.

The trip took about five minutes, and so far as Al was concerned, it was one long blur. At the end of the journey, the blur lifted for an instant, long enough to give Al one good glimpse of his surroundings — a residential street in what might have been Brooklyn or Queens (or Cincinnati or Detroit, he thought morbidly) — before he was hustled into the basement of a two-family house. He found himself in a windowless, brightly lit chamber cluttered with complex-looking machinery and with a dozen or so alarmingly identical little bald-headed men. Not until then did his paralysis lift.

The chubbiest of the bunch glared sourly at him and asked, "Are you a spy?"

"I'm just an innocent bystander," Al said earnestly. "I picked up my phone and started to dial, and all of a sudden some guy asked me if I was Operator Nine.

Honest, that's all."

"Overlapping of the crutch interval," muttered Mordecai. "Slipped matrix."

"Umm. Unfortunate," the chubby one commented. "We'll have to dispose of him."

"Demolecularization is the best way," Giovanni put in immediately.

"Dispose of him *humanely*, I mean. It's revolting to think of taking the life of an inferior being. But he simply can't remain in this four-space any longer, not if he knows."

"But I *don't* know!" Al protested. "I couldn't be any more mixed up if I tried! Won't you please tell me—"

"Very well," said the pudgiest one, who seemed to be the leader. "Waldemar, tell him about us."

Waldemar said, "You're now in the local headquarters of a secret mutant group working for the overthrow of humanity as you know it. By some accident, you happened to dial our private communication exchange, MUtant 4—"

"I thought it was MUgump 4," Al interjected.

"The code name, naturally," said Waldemar. "To continue: you channeled into our communication network. You now know too much. Your presence in this space-time nexus jeopardizes the success of our entire movement. Therefore we are forced—"

"—to demolecularize—" Giovanni began.

"—to dispose of you," Waldemar continued sternly. "We're humane beings—most of us—and we won't do anything that would make you suffer. But you can't stay in this area of space-time, can you?"

Al shook his head dimly. These little potbellied men were mutants working for the overthrow of humanity? Well, he had no reason to think they were lying to him. The world was full of little potbellied men. Maybe they were all part of the secret organization.

"Look," he said, "I didn't *want* to dial your number. It was all a silly accident. But I'm a fair guy. Let me get out of here and I'll keep mum about the whole thing. You can go ahead and overthrow humanity, if that's what you want to do. I promise not to interfere in any way. If you're mutants, you ought to be able to look into my mind and see that I'm sincere—"

"We have no telepathic powers," declared the chubby leader curtly. "If we had, there would be no need for a communications network in the first place. In the second place, your sincerity is not the issue. We have enemies. If you were to fall into their hands—"

"I won't say a word! Even if they torture me — brainwash me — I swear I'll keep quiet!"

"No. At this stage in our campaign, we can take no risks. You'll have to go. Prepare the temporal centrifuge, Mordecai."

Four of the little men, led by Mordecai, unveiled a complicated-looking device of the general size and shape of a concrete mixer. Waldemar and Giovanni shoved Al toward the machine. It came rapidly to life: dials glowed,

indicator needles teetered, loud buzzes and clicks implied readiness.

Al said nervously, "What are you going to do to me?"

"This machine will hurl you forward in time," Waldemar explained. "Too bad we have to rip you right out of your temporal matrix, but we've no choice. You'll be well taken care of up ahead, though. No doubt, by the 25th century, our kind will have taken over completely. You'll be the last of the Normals. Practically a living fossil. You'll love it. You'll be a walking museum piece."

"Assuming the machine works," Giovanni put in maliciously. "We don't really know if it does, you see."

Al gaped. They were busily strapping him to a cold copper slab in the heart of the machine. "You don't even know if it *works*?"

"Not really," Waldemar admitted. "Present theory holds that time-travel works only one way — forward. So we haven't been able to recover any of our test specimens and see how they reacted. Of course, they *do* vanish when the machine is turned on, so we know they must go *somewhere*."

"Oh," Al said weakly.

He was trussed in thoroughly. Experimental wriggling of his right wrist showed him that. But even if he could get loose, these weird little men would only freeze him and put him into the machine again.

His shoulders slumped resignedly. He wondered if anyone would miss him. The Friendly Finance Corporation certainly would. But since, in a sense, it was their fault he was in this mess now, he couldn't get very upset about that. They could always sue his estate for the \$300 he owed them, if his estate was worth that much.

Nobody else was going to mind the disappearance of Albert Miller from the space-time continuum, he thought dourly. His parents were dead, he hadn't seen his one sister in fifteen years, and the girl he used to know in Topeka was married and at last report had three kids.

Still and all, he liked 1959. He wasn't sure how he would take to the 25th century — or the 25th century to him.

"Ready for temporal discharge," Mordecai sang out.

The chubby leader peered up at Al. "We're sorry about all this, you understand. But nothing and nobody can be allowed to stand in the way of the Cause."

"Sure," Al said. "I understand."

The concrete-mixer part of the machine began to revolve, bearing Al with it as it built up tempo-kinetic potential. Momentum increased alarmingly. In the background, Al heard an ominous droning sound that grew louder and louder, until it drowned out everything else. He heard a *pop!* like the sound of a breaking balloon.

It was the rupturing of the space-time continuum. Al Miller went hurtling forward along the four-space track, head first. He shut his eyes and hoped for the best.

When the dizziness stopped, he found himself sitting in the middle of an impeccably clean, faintly yielding roadway, staring up at the wheels of vehicles swishing by overhead at phenomenal speeds. After a moment or two more, he realized they were not airborne, but simply automobiles racing along an elevated roadway made of some practically invisible substance.

So the temporal centrifuge *had* worked!

Al glanced around. A crowd was collecting. A couple of hundred people had formed a big circle. They were pointing and muttering. Nobody approached closer than fifty or sixty feet.

They weren't potbellied mutants. Without exception, they were all straight-backed six-footers with full heads of hair. The women were tall, too. Men and women alike were dressed in a sort of tuniclike garment made of iridescent material that constantly changed colors.

A gong began to ring, rapidly peaking in volume. Al scrambled to his feet and put on a tentative smile.

"My name's Miller. I come from 1959. Would somebody mind telling me what year this is, and—"

He was drowned out by two hundred voices screaming in terror. The crowd stampeded away, dashing madly in every direction, as if he were some ferocious monster. The gong continued to clang loudly. Cars hummed overhead.

Al saw a squat, beetle-shaped black vehicle coming toward him on the otherwise empty road. The car pulled up half a block away, the top sprang open, and a figure clad in what might have been a driver's suit — or a spacesuit — stepped out and advanced toward Al.

"Dozzinon murrifar volan," the armored figure called out.

"No speak," Al replied. "I'm a stranger here."

To his dismay, he saw the other draw something shaped like a weapon and point it at him. Al's hands shot immediately into the air. A globe of bluish light exuded from the broad nozzle of the gun, hung suspended for a moment, and drifted toward Al. He dodged uneasily to one side, but the globe of light followed him, descended, and wrapped itself around him.

It was like being on the inside of a soap-bubble. He could see out, though distortedly. He touched the curving side of the globe in a cautious way; it was resilient and springy to the touch, but his finger did not go through.

He noticed with some misgiving that his bubble-cage was starting to drift off the ground. It trailed a ropelike extension, which the man in the armored suit deftly grabbed and knotted to the rear bumper of his car. He drove quickly away — with Al, bobbing in his impenetrable bubble of light, tagging helplessly along like a captured Gaul being dragged through the streets of Rome behind a chariot — but several feet in the air.

He got used to the irregular motion after a while and relaxed enough to be able to study his surroundings. He was passing through a remarkably antiseptic-looking city, free from refuse and dust. Towering buildings, all

bright and spankily new-looking, shot up everywhere. People goggled at him from the safety of the pedestrian walkways as he jounced past.

After about ten minutes, the car halted outside an imposing building whose facade bore the words *Istfaq Barnoll*. Three men in armored suits appeared from within to flank Al's captor as a kind of honor guard. Al was borne within.

He was nudged gently into a small room on the ground floor. The door rolled shut behind him and seemed to join the rest of the wall; no division-line was apparent. A moment later, the balloon popped open, and just in time, too; the air had been getting quite stale inside it.

Al glanced around. A square window opened in the wall and three grim-faced men peered intently at him from an adjoining cubicle.

A voice from a speaker grid above Al's head said, "Murrifar althrosk?"

"Al Miller, from the 20th century. And it wasn't my idea to come here, believe me."

"Durbal haznik? Quittimar?"

Al shrugged. "No parley-voo. Honest, I don't savvy."

His three interrogators conferred among themselves — taking what seemed to Al the needless precaution of switching off the mike to prevent him from overhearing their deliberations.

He saw one of the men leave the observation cubicle. When the man returned, some five minutes later, he brought with him a tall, gloomy-looking man wearing an impressive spade-shaped beard.

The mike was turned on again. Spadebeard said rumblingly, "How be thou hight?"

"Eh?"

"An thou reck the King's tongue, I conjure thee speak!"

Al grinned. No doubt they had fetched an expert in dead languages to talk to him. "Right language, but the wrong time. I'm from the 20th century, not the tenth. Come forward a ways."

Spadebeard paused to change mental gears. "A thousand pardons — I mean *sorry*. Wrong idiom. Dig me now?"

"I follow you. What year is this?"

"It is 2431. And from whence be you?"

"You don't quite have it straight yet, but I'm from 1959."

"And how came you hither?"

"I wish I knew," Al said. "I was just trying to phone the loan company, see? Anyway, I got involved with these little fat guys who wanted to take over the world. Mutants, they said they were. And they decided they had to get rid of me, so they bundled me into their time machine and shot me forward. So I'm here."

"A spy of the mutated ones, eh?"

"Spy? Who said anything about a spy? Talk about

jumping to conclusions! I'm—"

"You have been sent by them to wreak mischief among us. No transparent story of yours will deceive us. You are not the first to come to our era, you know. And you will meet the same fate the others met."

Al shook his head foggily. "Look here, you're making a big mistake. I'm not a spy for anybody. And I don't want to get involved in any war between you and the mutants—"

"The war is over. The last of the mutated ones was exterminated 50 years ago."

"Okay, then. What can you fear from me? Honest, I don't want to cause any trouble. If the mutants are wiped out, how could my spying help them?"

"No action in time and space is ever absolute. In our fourspace, the mutants are eradicated — but they lurk elsewhere, waiting for their chance to enter and spread destruction."

Al's brain was swimming. "Let's let that pass. I'm not a spy. I just want to be left alone. Let me settle down here somewhere — put me on probation, show me the ropes, stake me to a few credits, or whatever you use for money here. I won't make any trouble."

"Your body teems with micro-organisms of diseases long extinct in this world. Only the fact that we were able to confine you in a force-bubble almost as soon as you arrived here saved us from a terrible epidemic of ancient diseases."

"A couple of injections, that's all, and you can kill any bacteria on or in me," Al pleaded. "You're advanced people. You ought to be able to do a simple thing like that."

"And then there is the matter of your genetic structure," Spadebeard continued inexorably. "You bear genes long since eliminated from humanity as undesirable. Permitting you to remain here, breeding furtively, would introduce unutterable confusion. Perhaps you carry latently the same mutant strain that cost humanity so many centuries of bloodshed!"

"No," Al protested. "Look at me. I'm pretty tall, no potbelly, a full head of hair—"

"The gene is recessive. But it crops up unexpectedly."

"I solemnly promise to control my breeding," Al declared. "I won't run around scattering my genes all over your shiny new world. That's a promise."

"Your appeal is rejected," came the inflexible reply.

Al shrugged. He knew when he was beaten. "Okay," he said wearily. "I didn't want to live in your damn century anyway. When's the execution?"

"Execution?" Spadebeard looked stunned. "Dove's whiskers, do you think we would—would actually—"

He couldn't get the word out.

Al supplied it: "Put me to death?"

Spadebeard's expression was sickly. He looked ready to retch. Al heard him mutter vehemently to his companions in the observation cubicle: "Gonnim def

larrimog! Egfar!"

"Murrifar althrosk," suggested one of his companions.

Spadebeard, evidently reassured, nodded. He said to Al, "No doubt a barbarian like yourself *would* expect to be — to be made dead." Gulping, he went gamely on. "We have no such vindictive intention."

"Well, what *are* you going to do to me?"

"Send you across the timeline to a world where your friends, the mutated ones, reign supreme," Spadebeard replied. "It's the least we can do for you, spy."

The hidden door of his cell puckered open. Another armor-suited figure entered, pointing a gun, and discharged a blob of blue light that drifted toward Al and rapidly englobed him. He was drawn by the trailing end out into a corridor.

It hadn't been a very sociable reception here in the 25th century, he thought as he was tugged along the hallway. In a way, he couldn't blame them. A time-traveler from the past was bound to be laden down with all sorts of germs. They couldn't risk letting him run around *breathing* at everybody. No wonder that crowd of onlookers had panicked when he had opened his mouth to speak to them.

The other business, though, that of his being a spy for the mutants—he couldn't figure that out at all. If the mutants had been wiped out fifty years ago, why worry about spies now? At least his species had managed to defeat the underground organization of potbellied little men. That was comforting. He wished he could get back to 1959, if only to snap his fingers in their jowly faces and tell them that all their sinister scheming was going to come to nothing.

Where was he heading now? Spadebeard had said, *Across the timeline to a world where the mutated ones reign supreme*. Whatever across the timeline meant, Al thought.

He was ushered into an impressive laboratory room and, bubble and all, was thrust into the waiting clasps of something that looked depressingly like an electric chair. Brisk technicians bustled around, throwing switches and checking connections.

Al glanced in appeal at Spadebeard. "Will you tell me what's going on?"

"It is very difficult to express in medieval terms," the linguist said. "The device makes use of dollibar force to transmit you through an inverse dormin vector — do I make myself clear?"

"Not very," Al confessed.

"Unhelpable. But you understand the concept of parallel continua at least, of course."

"No."

"Does it mean anything to you if I say that you'll be shunted across the spokes of the time-wheel to a totality that is simultaneously parallel and tangent to our four-space?"

"That isn't much better," Al said resignedly, for all

he was really getting was a headache. "You might as well start shunting me, I suppose."

Spadebeard nodded and turned to a technician. "Vorstrar althrosk," he commanded.

"Murrifar."

The technician grabbed an immense toggle switch with both hands and groaningly dragged it shut. Al heard a brief whine of closing relays. Then darkness surrounded him.

Once again he found himself on a city street. But the pavement was cracked and buckled, and grass blades poked up through the neglected concrete.

A dry voice said, "All right, you. Don't sprawl there like a ninny. Get up and come along."

Al peered doubtfully up into the snout of a fair-headed man. Four identical companions stood near him with arms folded. They all looked very much like Mordecai, Waldemar, Giovanni, and the rest, except that these mutants were decked out in futuristic-looking costumes bright with flashy gold trim and rocketship insignia.

Al put up his hands. "Where am I?" he asked in confusion.

"Earth, of course. You've just come through a dimensional gateway from the continuum of the Normals. Come along, spy. Into the van."

"But I'm *not* a spy," Al mumbled without very much hope as the five little men bundled him into a blue and red car the size of a small yacht. "At least, I'm not spying on *you*. I mean—"

"Save the explanations for the Overlord," was the curt instruction.

Al huddled miserably cramped between two vigilant mutants, while the others sat behind him. The van moved seemingly of its own volition, and at an enormous rate. A mutant power, Al thought. After a while he said, "Could you at least tell me what year this is?"

"Yes — 2431," snapped the mutant to his left.

"But that's the same year it was *over there*."

"Certainly. What else could it be?"

The question floored Al. He was silent for perhaps half a mile more. Since the van had no windows, he stared morosely at his feet.

Finally he asked, "How come you aren't afraid of catching my germs then? Over back of — ah — the dimensional gateway, they kept me cooped up in a force-field all the time so I wouldn't contaminate them. But you go right ahead breathing the same air I do."

"Do you think we fear the germs of a Normal, spy?" sneered the mutant at Al's right. "You forget that we're a superior race."

Al nodded. "Yes. I forgot about that."

The van halted suddenly and the mutant police hustled Al out, past a crowd of peering little fat men and women, and into a colossal dome of a building whose exterior was covered completely with faceted green glass. The effect was one of massive ugliness.

They ushered him into a sort of throne room presided over by a mutant fatter than the rest. The policeman gripping Al's right arm hissed "Bow when you enter the presence of the Overlord."

Al wasn't minded to argue. He dropped to his knees along with the others. A booming voice from above rang out. "What have you brought me today?"

"A spy, Your Nobility."

"Another? Rise, spy."

Al rose. "Begging Your Nobility's pardon, I'd like to put in a word or two on my own behalf—"

"Silence!" the Overlord roared.

Al closed his mouth.

The mutant drew himself up to his full height, about five feet one, and said, "The Normals have sent you across the dimensional gulf to spy on us."

"No, Your Nobility. They were afraid I'd spy on them, so they sent me over here. I'm from the year 1959, you see." Briefly, he explained everything, beginning with the boggled phone call and ending with his capture by the Overlord's men a short while ago.

The Overlord looked skeptical. "It is well known that the Normals plan to cross the dimensional gulf from their phantom world to this, the real one, and invade our civilization. You're but the latest of their advance scouts. Admit it!"

"No, Your Nobility, I'm not. On the other side, they told me I was a spy from 1959, and now you say I'm a spy from the other dimension. But I tell you —"

"Enough!" the mutant leader thundered. "Take him away. Place him in custody. We shall decide his fate later!"

Someone else already occupied the cell into which Al was thrust. He was a lanky, sad-faced Normal who slouched forward to shake hands once the door had clanged shut.

"Thurizad manifosk," he said.

"Sorry, I don't speak that language," said Al.

The other grinned. "I understand. All right: greetings. I'm Darren Phelps. Are you a spy too?"

"No, dammit!" Al snapped. Then: "Sorry. Didn't mean to take it out on you. My name's Al Miller. Are you a native of this place?"

"Me? Dove's whiskers, what a sense of humor! Of course I'm not a native! You know as well as I do that there aren't any Normals left in this fourspace continuum."

"None at all?"

"Hasn't been one born here in centuries," Phelps said. "But you're just joking, eh? You're from Baileffod's outfit, I suppose."

"Who?"

"Baileffod. Baileffod! You mean you aren't? Then you must be from higher up!" Phelps thrust his hands sideways in some kind of gesture of respect. "Penguin's paws. Excellency; I apologize. I should have seen at once—"

"No, I'm not from your organization at all," Al said. "I don't know what you're talking about. Word of honor."

Phelp smiled cunningly. "Of course, Excellency! I understand completely."

"Cut that out! Why doesn't anyone ever believe me? I'm not from Baileffod and I'm not from higher up. I come from 1959. Do you hear me — 1959? And that's the truth."

Phelp's eyes went wide. "From the past?"

Al nodded. "I stumbled into the mutants in 1959 and they shipped me five centuries ahead to get rid of me. Only when I arrived, I wasn't welcome, so I was shipped across the dimensional whatzis to here. Everyone thinks I'm a spy, wherever I go. What are you doing here?"

Phelp smiled. "Why, I am a spy."

"From 2431?"

"Naturally. We have to keep tabs on the mutants somehow. I came through the gateway wearing an invisibility shield, but it popped an ultrone and I vizzed out. They jugged me last month and I suppose I'm stuck in this place for keeps."

Al rubbed thumbs tiredly against his eyeballs. "Wait a minute—how come you speak my language? On the other side, they had to get hold of a linguistics expert to talk to me."

"All spies are trained to talk English," said Phelps. "That's the language the mutants speak here. In the real world, we speak Vorkish, naturally. It's the language developed by Normals for communication during the Mutant Wars. Your 'linguistics expert' was probably one of our top spies."

"And over here the mutants have won?"

"Completely. Three hundred years ago, in this continuum, the mutants developed a two-way time machine that enabled them to go back and forth, eliminating Normal leaders before they were born. Whereas in our world, the *real* world, two-way time travel is impossible. That's where the continuum split begins. We Normals fought a grim war of extermination against the mutants in our four-space and finally wiped them out, despite their superior powers, in 2390. Clear?"

"More or less." Rather less than more, Al added privately. "So there are only mutants in this world, and there are only Normals in your world."

"Exactly!"

"And you're a spy from the other side."

"You've got it now! You see even though, strictly speaking, this world is only a phantom, it's got some pretty real characteristics. For instance, if the mutants killed you here, you'd be dead. Permanently. So there's a lot of rivalry across the gateway; the mutants are always scheming to invade us, and *vice versa*. Confidentially, I don't think anything will ever come of all the scheming."

"You don't?"

"Nah," Phelps said. "The way things stand now, each side has a perfectly good enemy just beyond reach. But

actually going to war would be messy, while relaxing our guard and allowing peace to break out would foul up our economy. So we keep sending spies back and forth, and prepare for war. It's a nice system, except when you happen to get yourself caught, like me."

"What'll happen to you?"

Phelp shrugged. "They may let me rot here for a few decades. Or they might decide to condition me and send me back as a spy for *them*. Tiger tails, who could know?"

"Would you change sides like that?"

"I wouldn't have any choice — not after I was conditioned," Phelp said. "But I don't worry much about it. It's a risk I knew about when I signed on for spy duty."

Al shuddered. It was beyond him how someone could voluntarily let himself get involved in this game of dimension-shifting and mutant-battling. But it takes all sorts to make a continuum, he philosophically decided.

Half an hour later, three rotund mutant police came to fetch him. They marched him downstairs and into a bare, ugly little room where a battery of interrogators quizzed him for better than an hour. He stuck to his story, throughout everything, until at last they indicated they were through with him.

He spent the next two hours in a drafty cell, by himself, until finally a gaudily robed mutant unlocked the door and said, "The Overlord commands you to present yourself."

The Overlord looked worried. He leaned forward on his throne, fist digging into his fleshy chin. In his booming voice — Al realized at last that it was artificially amplified — the Overlord rumbled, "Miller, you're a *problem*."

"I'm sorry, Your Nobil—"

"*Quiet!* I'll do the talking."

Al did not reply.

The Overlord went on, "We've checked your story inside and out, and confirmed it with one of our spies on the other side of the gate. You really are from 1959, or thereabouts. What can we do with you? Generally speaking, when we catch a Normal snooping around here, we psycho-condition him and send him back across the gateway to spy for us. But we can't do that to you, because you don't belong on the other side, and they've already tossed you out once. On the other hand, we can't keep you here, maintaining you forever at state expense. And it wouldn't be civilized to kill you, would it?"

"No, Your Nobil—"

"*Silence!*"

Al gulped.

The Overlord glowered at him and continued thinking out loud. "I suppose we could perform experiments on you, though. You must be a walking laboratory of Normal microorganisms that we could synthesize and fire through the gateway when we invade their fourspace. Yes, by the Gnome, *then* you'd be useful

to our cause! Zechariah?"

"Yes, Nobility?" A ribbon-bedecked guardsman snapped to attention.

"Take this Normal to the biological laboratories for examination. I'll have further instructions as soon as—"

Al heard a peculiar whanging noise from the back of the throne room. The Overlord appeared to freeze on his throne. Turning, Al saw a band of determined-looking Normals come bursting in, led by Darren Phelp.

"*There you are!*" Phelp cried. "I've been looking all over for you!" He was waving a peculiar needle-nozzled gun.

"What's going on?" Al gasped.

Phelp grinned. "The invasion! It came, after all! Our troops are pouring through the gateway armed with these freezer guns. They immobilize any mutant who gets in the way of the field."

"When — when did all this happen?"

"It started two hours ago. We've captured the entire city! Come on, will you? Whiskers, there's no time to waste!"

"Where in blazes am I supposed to go?"

Phelp smiled. "To the nearest dimensional lab, of course. We're going to send you back to your own time."

A dozen triumphant Normals stood in a tense knot around Al in the laboratory. From outside came the sound of jubilant singing. The invasion was a howling success.

As Phelp had explained it, the victory was due to the recent invention of a kind of time-barrier projector. The projector had cut off all contact between the mutant world and its own future, preventing time-traveling mutant scouts from getting back to 2431 with news of the invasion. With two-way travel, the great mutant advantage, thus nullified, the success of the surprise attack was made possible—and easy.

Al listened to this explanation with minimal interest. He barely understood every third word, and, in any event, his main concern was in getting home.

He was strapped into a streamlined and much modified version of the temporal centrifuge that had originally hurled him forward into 2431.

Phelps explained things to him. "You see here, we set the machine for 1959. What day was it when you left? And how close can you get to the moment?"

"Ah—October 10. It was exactly 3:30 in the afternoon."

"Make the setting, Frozz." Phelp nodded. "You'll be shunted back along the time-line. Of course, you'll land in this continuum, since in our world there's no such thing as pastward time travel. But once you reach your own time, all you do is activate this small transdimensional generator, and you'll be hurled across safe and sound into the very day you left, in your own fourspace."

"You can't know how much I appreciate all this," Al said very warmly.

He felt a pleasant glow of love for all mankind, for the first time since his unhappy phone call. At last someone was taking sympathetic interest in his plight. At last he was on his way home, back to the relative sanity of 1959, where he could start forgetting this entire nightmarish jaunt. Mutants and Normals and spies and time machines . . .

"You'd better get going," Phelps said. "We have to get the occupation under way here."

"Sure," Al agreed. "Don't let me hold you up. I can't wait to get going — no offense intended."

"And remember, soon as your surroundings look familiar, jab the activator button on this generator. Otherwise you'll slither into an interspace where we couldn't answer for the consequences."

Al nodded tensely. "I won't forget."

"I hope not. Ready?"

"Ready."

Someone threw a switch. Al began to spin. He heard the popping sound that was the rupturing of the temporal matrix. Like a cork shot from a champagne bottle, Al arched out backward through time, heading for 1959.

He woke in his own room on 23rd Street. His head hurt. His mind was full of phrases like temporal centrifuge and transdimensional generator.

He picked himself off the floor and rubbed his head.

Wow, he thought. It must have been a sudden fainting spell. And now his head was crowded with nonsense.

Going to the sidebar, he pulled out the half-empty bourbon bottle and measured off a few fingers' worth.

After the drink, his nerves felt steadier. His mind was still cluttered with inexplicable thoughts and images. Sinister little fat men and complex machines, transparent roadways in the air and men in fancy tunics.

A bad dream, he thought.

Then he remembered. It wasn't any dream. He had actually taken the round trip into 2431, returning by way of some other continuum.

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He had pressed the generator button at the proper time, and now here he was, safe and sound. No longer the football of a bunch of different factions. Home in his own snug little fourspace, or whatever it was.

He frowned. He recalled that Mordecai had severed the telephone wire. But the phone looked intact now. Maybe it had been fixed while he was gone. He picked it up. Unless he got that loan extension today, he was cooked.

There was no need for him to look up the number of the Friendly Finance Corporation; he knew it all too well. He began to dial. MURRAY HILL 4—

The receiver clicked queerly. A voice said, "Come in, Operator Nine. Operator Nine, do you read me?"

Al's jaw sagged. This is where I came in, he thought wildly. He struggled to put down the phone. But his muscles would not respond. It would be easier to bend the sun in its orbit than to break the path of the continuum. He heard his own voice say, "I didn't want the operator. There must be something wrong with my phone if—"

"Just a minute. Who are you?"

Al fought to break the contact. But he was hemmed away in a small corner of his mind while his voice went on, "I ought to ask you that. What are you doing on the other end, anyway? I hadn't even finished dialing. I got as far as MU-4 and —"

"Well? You dialed Mugwump 4 and you got us. What more do you want?" A suspicious pause. "Say, you aren't Operator Nine!"

Inwardly, Al wanted to scream. No scream would come. In this continuum, the past (his future) was immutable. He was caught on the track, and there was no escape. None whatever. And, he realized in frozen horror, there never would be.

—ROBERT SILVERBERG

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THE TEMPTATION OF HARRINGAY

By SARAH ZETTEL

Illustrated by Tom X

Look, if you're going to get like that, Mr. Harringay, I'm out of here. And taking the painting with me. I'm just telling you what she said.

I told you, I went to art school with her. We did anatomy together. Oh, stop with the look. Well, so? I can tell you, she's said plenty about her-cousin-the-gallery-owner and you probably wouldn't like any of it.

I just went to her studio to say "hi," and there she was, with this. I was coming to New York anyway, and I told her I'd take it here for her. She was too broke to get a ticket herself.

Brilliant isn't it? Those colors, and that's what I call seamless brushwork. It really does seem to move, especially around the eyes. Yeah, I know. *Nobody* would have thought she had it in her, me included, and I've had my eye on her for awhile.

She said it happened at the Art Fair. I mean, even you've heard of Ann Arbor's Art Fair. It's one of the biggest in the country. Stretches out for blocks and you've got to get past a jury to be allowed to set up your booth and show your stuff. Well, she was down on Main Street, looking at booth after booth of the best work in the country, and getting depressed. Then, she saw this old homeless guy standing behind these stalls full of expensive artistic and intellectual excesses and justaring at them all. She had her camera with her and gave

the guy ten bucks to take his picture.

"Stare at the booths, like you're hungry. Don't smile, either. Look miserable."

I don't think the part called for much acting ability.

Anyway, she snaps some shots from different angles, gets them developed at one of those twenty-four hour places and takes them back to her studio. Well, studio is maybe a bit much. Her space with the east-facing window in one of those fire-trap houses they carve up and rent out to the students one room at a time. She opens a fresh bottle of scotch and gets started.

After about six hours and a third of the bottle, she says, it was getting pretty obvious inspiration had just blown her off again. She got a mediocre portrait of a homeless, shabby, old black guy.

"I mean, it's been done." She stood back and glowered at it. "Totally done. Politically correct scenes of urban poverty are just out. It's the nineties. Cynicism. World-weariness. Violence." She painted a gun in the old guy's fist.

"No. Too blunt." She scraped the gun off. "Subtlety. Maturity. Can't hack around like a kid fresh out of art school."

Yeah, I know she is and you know she is, but she's in deep denial about it.

She says that's when she set to work on the face. "Resentment," she said. "That's the ticket. Indignation at the thoughtless oppressor. Yeah . . ."

No, I don't think she got those eyes right away. Maybe the brows, angled and sharp like that. I think the eyes probably came last.

Anyway, never mind what eventually happened, right then she says she didn't feel like she was getting

anywhere. The mood of the piece, she says, eluded her. I think it fell into the scotch, but hey, what do I know? She fiddled around with it for hours, she says, changing the brows, working on the mouth, the chin, the eyes, between liberal doses from the bottle.

She kept at it until it got dark and she switched on the lights. Cheap, ordinary lights from K-Mart, she says, no good to paint by. She kept on working anyway. But the righteous indignation just didn't turn up. Now he just looked like a mean, shabby old black guy.

This is where it gets weird. She said she got this feeling like the old guy was fighting her. Like his face was shifting under her brush, turning this way and that to get away from her. Finally, she got so pissed off that she just jammed the brush down into the blob of Morning Red No. 4 and drew it back and went, *thwak!* Left a huge, scarlet blob across the old guy's mouth.

She was real damn surprised when he reached up and wiped it off.

"Well if you're gonna be that way about it . . ." He spat red acrylic.

The scotch, she said, stopped her from thinking about the whole thing too much. "It's your fault," she said, brushing the brush at the Old Guy. "Where's the righteous indignation? Come on, shape up!"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, please. Look, chick-a-boo, you know about as much about righteous indignation as you do about quantum mechanics. You ain't suffered anything worse than a hangover your whole life, Little Girl. How do you expect to paint the result of suffering?"

"Shut your face!" she shouted and chucked another brush full of paint at the Old Guy.

He wiped it away, fast. He had to, she said, acrylics dry pretty quick.

"On top of that," he said, shaking red globs off his hands so they splattered on the pavement. "Artists don't just suffer, Sister. They see. They got eyes in their souls. They know what's really going on." He walked towards her then, filling the canvas. It was like a camera easing in for a close up. "You, you got suburban princess blinders on."

She says she's pretty sure she turned purple at that. She felt her ears burn.

"Now, I," the Old Guy's eyes sparkled, "am in a position to remove those blinders for you. I can guarantee you a masterpiece. One that will be acknowledged as a masterpiece in your lifetime, too. And all it will cost you is . . ."

"Oh, please." She planted both hands on her hips, with the brush sticking out and dropping Morning Red on the carpet. "You don't expect me to give you my soul for one lousy painting?"

Yeah, you're right, that must have been amazingly good scotch. I mean, I can't even think what Hell would want with another artist's soul. If this is their best approach, what they *really* need down there would be people with business skills.

So, she says, the Old Guy pulled back a little.

"Course not. I know about inflation. Two paintings. Two masterpieces. Guaranteed."

"Go to hell." She slashed the brush across the canvas, pinning down one of the old guy's arms behind a ragged bar of Morning Red.

Well, he pried himself free, and the fight was on. She was beyond furious. The Old Guy shouldn't have called her names while she was plastered. Your cousin is a *mean* drunk. I mean, ladylike doesn't enter her vocabulary under good circumstances, but after a good chunk of a fifth . . .

The Old Guy's shouting variations on "guaranteed masterpieces!" and she's attacking with the whole pallet. Blobs of Morning Red No. 4. Smears of Burnt Sienna No. 12. Murderous slashes of City Indigo No. 27. Lucky for the Old Guy she was completely blitzed and her aim was lousy. He kept dodging. He clawed frantically at the acrylic when she did actually manage to land one. Finally, she caught his foot with a big goober of After Hours Amethyst 15. He pulled loose with this long, sucking noise.

"Five!" he shouted. "Five masterpieces, fame for your whole life! Interviews on MTV! All for your soul! Come on! It's not like you're *using* it for anything!"

She got him across the mouth with a fresh load of City Indigo.

The thing was, the Old Guy could move like a bat out of hell (her simile, not mine) and she'd repainted him so many times that he was even thicker than the gobs she was laying on him.

But finally, inspiration worked its way past the alcohol. She snatched up the sauerkraut jar of turpentine and with a move that would've done Dorothy proud, splashed the whole load of it across the Old Guy's body.

His torso slumped and slouched and melted away in rivulets.

"Now, you bastard . . ." She flicked fresh streaks of color straight into his open mouth, and across what was left of his arms, muzzling him and trapping him in place. With hands about as substantial as watered Coke, he couldn't wipe the smears away.

She kept on going until she passed out cold.

That's when I came in. I sobered her up and talked her into letting me take the picture to you.

Yeah, I know. It is incredible isn't it? The way she got him to writhe like that. He really seems to be struggling against his meaningless bonds. It's beyond fresh. It's totally new.

Oh, yeah, I'm sure she can do more just as good. And she'd probably be glad to let you organize the show. Keep it all in the family and all that. Oh yea, I know the art world. A show of that caliber would give this little place a boost all the way into orbit, especially with a wheeler-dealer like you behind it.

My only question is, what would you be willing to give us for it?

—SARAH ZETTEL



OLD RAMBLING HOUSE

By FRANK HERBERT

Illustrated by Heywood

On his last night on Earth, Ted Graham stepped out of a glass-walled telephone booth, and ducked to avoid a swooping moth that battered itself in a frenzy against a bare globe above the booth.

Ted Graham was a long-necked man with a head of pronounced egg shape topped by prematurely balding sandy hair. Something about his lanky, intense appearance suggested his occupation: certified public accountant.

He stopped behind his wife, who was studying a newspaper classified page, and frowned. "They said to wait here. They'll come get us. Said the place is hard to find at night."

Martha Graham looked up from the newspaper. She was a dollfaced woman, heavily pregnant, a kind of pink prettiness about her. The yellow glow from the light above the booth subdued the red auburn cast of her ponytail hair.

"I just *have* to be in a house when the baby's born," she said. "What'd they sound like?"

"I dunno. There was a funny kind of interruption — like an argument in some foreign language."

"Did they sound foreign?"

"In a way." He motioned along the night-shrouded

line of trailers toward one with two windows glowing amber. "Let's wait inside. These bugs out here are fierce."

"Did you tell them which trailer is ours?"

"Yes. They didn't sound at all anxious to look at it. That's odd — them wanting to trade their house for a trailer."

"There's nothing odd about it. They've probably just got itchy feet like we did."

He appeared not to hear her. "Funniest-sounding language you ever heard when that argument started — like a squirt of noise."

Inside the trailer, Ted Graham sat down on the green couch that opened into a double bed for company.

"They could use a good tax accountant around here," he said. "When I first saw the place, I got that definite feeling. The valley looks prosperous. It's a wonder nobody's opened an office here before."

His wife took a straight chair by the counter separating kitchen and living area, folded her hands across her heavy stomach.

"I'm just continental tired of wheels going around under me," she said. "I want to sit and stare at the same view for the rest of my life. I don't know how a trailer ever seemed glamorous when —"

"It was the inheritance gave us itchy feet," he said.

Tires gritted on gravel outside.

Martha Graham straightened. "Could that be them?"

"Awful quick, if it is." He went to the door, opened it, stared down at the man who was just raising a hand to knock.

"Are you Mr. Graham?" asked the man.

"Yes." He found himself staring at the caller.

"I'm Clint Rush. You called about the house?" The man moved farther into the light. At first, he'd appeared an old man, fine wrinkle lines in his face, a tired leather look to his skin. But as he moved his head in the light, the wrinkles seemed to dissolve — and with them, the years lifted from him.

"Yes, we called," said Ted Graham. He stood aside. "Do you want to look at the trailer now?"

Martha Graham crossed to stand beside her husband. "We've kept it in awfully good shape," she said. "We've never let anything get seriously wrong with it."

She sounds too anxious, thought Ted Graham. I wish she'd let me do the talking for the two of us.

"We can come back and look at your trailer tomorrow in daylight," said Rush. "My car's right out here, if you'd like to see our house."

Ted Graham hesitated. He felt a nagging worry tug at his mind, tried to fix his attention on what bothered him.

"Hadn't we better take our car?" he asked. "We could follow you."

"No need," said Rush. "We're coming back into town tonight anyway. We can drop you off then."

Ted Graham nodded. "Be right with you as soon as I lock up."

Inside the car, Rush mumbled introductions. His wife was a dark shadow in the front seat, her hair drawn back in a severe bun. Her features suggested gypsy blood. He called her Raimee.

Odd name, thought Ted Graham. And he noticed that she, too, gave that strange first impression of age that melted in a shift of light.

Mrs. Rush turned her gypsy features toward Martha Graham. "You are going to have a baby?"

It came out as an odd, veiled statement.

Abruptly, the car rolled forward.

Martha Graham said, "It's supposed to be born in about two months. We hope it's a boy."

Mrs. Rush looked at her husband. "I have changed my mind," she said.

Rush spoke without taking his attention from the road. "It is too" He broke off, spoke in a tumble of strange sounds.

Ted Graham recognized it as the language he'd heard on the telephone.

Mrs. Rush answered in the same tongue, anger showing in the intensity of her voice. Her husband replied, his voice calmer.

Presently, Mrs. Rush fell moodily silent.

Rush tipped his head toward the rear of the car. "My wife has moments when she does not want to get rid of the old house. It has been with her for many years."

Ted Graham said, "Oh." Then: "Are you Spanish?"

Rush hesitated. "No. We are Basque."

He turned the car down a well-lighted avenue that merged into a highway. They turned onto a side road. There followed more turns — left, right, right.

Ted Graham lost track.

They hit a jolting bump that made Martha gasp.

"I hope that wasn't too rough on you," said Rush. "We're almost there."

The car swung into a lane, its lights picking out the skeleton outlines of trees: peculiar trees — tall, gaunt, leafless. They added to Ted Graham's feeling of uneasiness.

The lane dipped, ended at a low wall of a house — red brick with clerestory windows beneath overhanging eaves. The effect of the wall and a wide-beamed door they could see to the left was ultra-modern.

Ted Graham helped his wife out of the car, followed the Rushes to the door.

"I thought you told me it was an old house," he said.

"It was designed by one of the first modernists," said Rush. He fumbled with an odd curved key. The wide door swung open onto a hallway equally wide, carpeted by a deep pile rug. They could glimpse floor-to-ceiling view windows at the end of the hall, city lights beyond.

Martha Graham gasped, entered the hall as though in a trance. Ted Graham followed, heard the door close behind them.

"It's so-so-so big," exclaimed Martha Graham.

"You want to trade *this* for our trailer?" asked Ted Graham.

"It's too inconvenient for us," said Rush. "My work is over the mountains on the coast." He shrugged. "We cannot sell it."

Ted Graham looked at him sharply. "Isn't there any money around here?" He had a sudden vision of a tax accountant with no customers.

"Plenty of money, but no real estate customers."

They entered the living room. Sectional divans lined the walls. Subdued lighting glowed from the corners. Two paintings hung on the opposite walls — oblongs of odd lines and twists that made Ted Graham dizzy.

Warning bells clamored in his mind.

Martha Graham crossed to the windows, looked at the lights far away below. "I had no idea we'd climbed that far," she said. "It's like a fairy city."

Mrs. Rush emitted a short, nervous laugh.

Ted Graham glanced around the room, thought: *If the rest of the house is like this, it's worth fifty or sixty thousand. He thought of the trailer: A good one, but not worth more than seven thousand.*

Uneasiness was like a neon sign flashing in his mind. "This seems so" He shook his head.

"Would you like to see the rest of the house?" asked Rush.

Martha Graham turned from the window. "Oh, yes."

Ted Graham shrugged. *No harm in looking, he thought.*

When they returned to the living room, Ted Graham had doubled his previous estimate on the house's value. His brain reeled with the summing of it: a solarium with

an entire ceiling covered by sun lamps, an automatic laundry where you dropped soiled clothing down a chute, took it washed and ironed from the other end . . .

"Perhaps you and your wife would like to discuss it in private," said Rush. "We will leave you for a moment."

And they were gone before Ted Graham could protest.

Martha Graham said, "Ted, I honestly never in my life dreamed —"

"Something's very wrong, honey."

"But, Ted —"

"This house is worth at least a hundred thousand dollars. Maybe more. And they want to trade *this* —" he looked around him — "for a seven-thousand-dollar trailer?"

"Ted, they're foreigners. And if they're so foolish they don't know the value of this place, then why should —"

"I don't like it," he said. Again he looked around the room, recalled the fantastic equipment of the house. "But maybe you're right."

He stared out at the city lights. They had a lacelike quality: tall buildings linked by lines of flickering incandescence. Something like a Roman candle shot skyward in the distance.

"Okay!" he said. "If they want to trade, let's go push the deal . . ."

Abruptly, the house shuddered. The city lights blinked out. A humming sound filled the air.

Martha Graham clutched her husband's arm. "Ted! Wha — what was that?"

"I dunno." He turned. "Mr. Rush!"

No answer. Only the humming.

The door at the end of the room opened. A strange man came through it. He wore a short toga-like garment of gray, metallic cloth belted at the waist by something that glittered and shimmered through every color of the spectrum. An aura of coldness and power emanated from him — a sense of untouchable hauteur.

He glanced around the room, spoke in the same tongue the Rushes had used.

Ted Graham said, "I don't understand you, mister."

The man put a hand to his flickering belt. Both Ted and Martha Graham felt themselves rooted to the floor, a tingling sensation vibrating along every nerve.

Again the strange language rolled from the man's tongue, but now the words were understood.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Graham. This is my wife. What's going —"

"How did you get here?"

"The Rushes — they wanted to trade us this house for our trailer. They brought us. Now look, we —"

"What is your talent — your occupation?"

"Tax accountant. Say! Why all these —"

"That was to be expected," said the man. "Clever!

Oh, excessively clever!" His hand moved again to the belt. "Now be very quiet. This may confuse you momentarily."

Colored lights filled both the Grahams' minds. They staggered.

"You are qualified," said the man. "You will serve."

"Where are we?" demanded Martha Graham.

"The coordinates would not be intelligible to you," he said. "I am of the Rojac. It is sufficient for you to know that you are under Rojac sovereignty."

Ted Graham said, "But —"

"You have, in a way, been kidnapped. And the Raimees have fled to your planet — an unregistered planet."

"I'm afraid," Martha Graham said shakily.

"You have nothing to fear," said the man. "You are no longer on the planet of your birth — nor even in the same galaxy." He glanced at Ted Graham's wrist. "That device on your wrist — it tells your local time?"

"Yes."

"That will help in the search. And your sun — can you describe its atomic cycle?"

Ted Graham gazed in his mind for his science memories from school, from the Sunday supplements. "I can recall that our galaxy is a spiral like —"

"Most galaxies are spiral."

"Is this some kind of a practical joke?" asked Ted Graham.

The man smiled, a cold, superior smile. "It is no joke. Now I will make you a proposition."

Ted nodded warily. "All right, let's have the stinger."

"The people who brought you here were tax collectors we Rojac recruited from a subject planet. They were conditioned to make it impossible for them to leave their job untended. Unfortunately, they were clever enough to realize that if they brought someone else in who could do their job, they were released from their mental bonds. Very clever."

"But —"

"You may have their job," said the man. "Normally, you would be put to work in the lower echelons, but we believe in meting out justice wherever possible. The Raimees undoubtedly stumbled on your planet by accident and lured you into this position without —"

"How do you know I can do their job?"

"That moment of brilliance was an aptitude test. You passed. Well, do you accept?"

"What about our baby?" Martha Graham worriedly wanted to know.

"You will be allowed to keep it until it reaches the age of decision — about the time it will take the child to reach adult stature."

"Then what?" insisted Martha Graham.

"The child will take its position in society — according to its ability."

"Will we ever see our child after that?"

"Possibly."

Ted Graham said, "What's the joker in this?"

Again the cold, superior smile. "You will receive conditioning similar to that which we gave the Raimees. And we will want to examine your memories to aid us in our search for your planet. It would be good to find a new inhabitable place."

"Why did they trap us like this?" asked Martha Graham.

"It's lonely work," the man explained. "Your house is actually a type of space conveyance that travels along your collection route — and there is much travel to the job. And then — you will not have friends, nor time for much other than work. Our methods are necessarily severe at times."

"Travel?" Martha Graham repeated in dismay.

"Almost constantly."

Ted Graham felt his mind whirling. And behind him, he heard his wife sobbing.

The Raimees sat in what had been the Grahams' trailer.

"For a few moments, I feared he would not succumb to the bait," she said. "I knew you could never overcome the mental compulsion enough to leave them there without their first agreeing."

Raimee chuckled. "Yes. And now I'm going to indulge in everything the Rojac never permitted. I'm going to write ballads and poems."

"And I'm going to paint," she said. "Oh, the delicious freedom!"

"Greed won this for us," he said. "The long study of the Grahams paid off. They couldn't refuse to trade."

"I knew they'd agree. The looks in their eyes when they saw the house! They both had . . ." She broke off, a look of horror coming into her eyes. "One of them did not agree!"

"They both did. You heard them."

"The baby?"

He stared at his wife. "But — but it is not at the age of decision!"

"In perhaps eighteen of this planet's years, it *will* be at the age of decision. What then?"

His shoulders sagged. He shuddered. "I will not be able to fight it off. I will have to build a transmitter, call the Rojac and confess!"

"And they will collect another inhabitable place," she said, her voice flat and toneless.

"I've spoiled it," he said. "I've spoiled it!"

—FRANK HERBERT

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SONGS OF THE SOUL

By JACQUELINE F. FALKENHAN

Illustrated by Rivera

"Doctoree, pleeease," screamed a tiny dark woman with light blue hair. For days now, she had been haunting his every move, keening her *if onlys* in his ear. *If only* she hadn't left her child alone, *if only* she had called a neighbor.

Tweed clad and lanky, Dr. Jean L'Espoir strode through the cluttered pseudo-Wild-West-19th-Century street, ignoring the cries of the blue-haired woman, and stepping over the corpse of a male Caucasian, one of his recent patients. A fecal stench filled the air.

The doctor had his own *if onlys*. *If only* he hadn't fought with Aelia. Had she resented the hours he spent on what she called his "obsession"? *If only* he had simply ignored her opinion. But Aelia was always difficult to ignore and impossible to forget for more than a couple of hours.

L'Espoir walked faster. The woman caught up with him.

"Doctoree," she said in her unrecognizable accent, a bit out of breath. Suddenly she noticed the nearest corpse was missing four fingers — apparently chopped off after death by the fire ax lying nearby. Any rings were long gone.

"Ohhh," she moaned. Her dark face seemed to drain of blood. Her hands plucked nervously at her blue paper overalls.

"The answer is the same today, Ms. Sunde, as it was yesterday," the doctor said as he picked up the bloody ax and wiped its dull blade with a pocket handkerchief.

He tried not to think about the dozens of corpses that daily littered this world, about how suicides and terminals improved the algae pudding, fertilized the vegetables, and made his business profitable.

Sunde followed him as he returned the ax to its wall bracket two storefronts away.

"I fail. I fail," she cried, tears running down her cheeks.

The doctor ignored her. Yesterday, she had become hysterical, claiming to have done something that caused the death of her three-year-old son.

L'Espoir was almost to his door when he heard a sad, sweet alien song — music he recognized like a wound recognizes salt. He froze, engrossed in memories.

"Pleeease," Sunde screeched as she caught up with him again. She pointed at the sign in his window. The blood bold neon sang over and over:

Success Unlimited

In smaller, steady white neon the sign added:

Have a Good Death

"That's what I desire. The priest forgave me. The Cardinal forgave me. But God does not forgive me. I

feel it's so."

L'Espoir knew that most people didn't have good deaths despite the industry of a million churches. They came to life's end afflicted with *onlys* and *might have beens*, and guilts of a billion nagging varieties.

"Ms. Sunde, I informed you yesterday that I have no time to work *pro bono publico*."

"No pro bono. Please do free."

"Pro bono is Latin for in the" — his palms turned up in frustrated resignation — "for free."

"Yes. Cleanse my mind free."

He was probably wasting his breath again. "If the Cardinal says God forgives you, believe him, woman."

Large liquid eyes held him captive. "You have been loved, Doctoree. I can tell."

Memory rushed in on him again. If *only* he hadn't gone to the pub that night. If *only* he hadn't been so eager to talk. He and his fellow academics knew how the galaxy *should* be run. Conversation was oil for the machinery of intellect. If *only* he hadn't been thirty minutes late.

"My personal affairs are none of —"

"I watch you. You are a man of loneliness. You take no companions." Her hand reached tentatively for his.

"Ms Sunde, your sexual favors will not buy my services. Now —"

"Why does a good man stay in this place where all evil comes?"

"My motivations are none of —"

"What do you look for?"

He shoved past her into his front office, neglecting to lock the door behind him. Glancing nervously at his small, white storefront, he ignored his many diplomas, black framed and dusty, favoring instead his electro-receptionist in its ebony desk. He had a legitimate medical doctorate; indeed, in a hundred and fifty years of striving, he had earned doctorates in general medicine, biochemistry, psychiatry, neurology, neurosurgery, neurophysics, quantum electronics, and xenoneurology (a very new field), and had a string of other framed degrees he seldom dusted, but had lovingly smuggled across the vastness of space to this world where they meant little — and the law feared to come.

Just as the doctor punched on the electro-receptionist, he heard someone come in behind him. Suddenly there was the stench of body odor and the sound of labored breath. The doctor's hand hovered over the panic button; his shoulder muscles squirmed with tension. Part of his exorbitant rent went for armament and muscle called the Goon Squad. Was this intruder a ruthless killer? The Hole was their haven. Perhaps a government infiltrator? He read upside down the information fed from his smart door into his electro-receptionist: "Two meters tall, one hundred and ninety kilograms, human male, Caucasian, no fingerprints, iris pattern fake. No weapons. Searching Jackson's files." Jackson Hole's over-burdened

computer was slow. Most likely the man was a minor scoundrel or con artist.

Cautiously, L'Espoir turned around. His eyes met the tiny dark eyes of the most grossly corpulent man he had ever seen. The fellow's belly arrived a half meter before his feet. Still, it was obvious this person had once been heavier. His flesh hung obscenely loose and he wore an empty holster and coiled clear tubing where a nasal-oxygen canister had once hung. Heavy-weight humans required extra oxygen. His once expensive tent-sized cashmere jacket looked like a wrinkled dirty blanket dropped over a hairless, flabby ape. In an age when beauty could be purchased, this man was grossly ugly, and he stunk as if he hadn't bathed in weeks.

The doctor had learned that criminals generally appear either ordinary or lethal. The tension drained from his shoulders as he walked around to take his seat behind the electro-receptionist. Maybe this customer was just a lost soul from a low-gravity world. The cheapest transport didn't allow for baths.

The visitor's cherub-pink mouth pursed; several chins quivered with his intent to speak. "Metzger Eisenhart," he said in an unexpectedly pleasant baritone voice that evidenced twinges of pain. According to the tardy receptionist, Metzger had arrived at seven hundred hours two days before.

"Take a seat please," said the doctor. The man pulled one of L'Espoir's cheap plastilike chairs across the rug to the desk and overwhelmed it with his bulk. Despite the man's tremendous weight, there was something snakelike about him. Perhaps the eyes?

"Do you have a terminality certificate or proof of a suicide implant?"

Terminals were sad, but suicides caused Dr. L'Espoir the most anguish. Even this damnable outlaw world wouldn't let him help anyone with a projected life span over two weeks. Suicides would die even if he relieved them of the reasons for their depression. When they received their death certificates, a destruct mechanism was placed within their bodies. Tampering with the device only meant it would go off earlier.

The man produced a certificate. Weeks before, he had been hit in the abdomen by a low-level shatter-gun blast and had, at most, a few more agonizing days.

That explained a lot. Low-level shattering blasts were the punishment of choice meted out by gambling casinos when their clients didn't pay; terminal, if the client didn't have regeneration funds, and always excruciatingly painful.

L'Espoir punched up a list of the current terminals and suicides. He couldn't help but notice that Sunde's name was not among them. Metzger's papers were in order.

"In case of your decease during the process, to whom may I send your remains? There is, of course, an extra fee of —"

The man's huge hand moved with unexpected speed, catching the good doctor by the shirt front, pulling him

out of his seat. "You'd better not let me die before you finish. You hear me."

L'Espoir's finger was a half second from the panic alarm and his heart in his throat.

"Sorry," Metzger released the shirt fabric and sank back into his chair, wheezing. "It's just that I want to die clean."

"Yes," responded Dr. L'Espoir, trying to calm his adrenaline rush. Whoever or whatever the man was, he had *strong* beliefs about death. "My services are very important and —"

"Can you ram-ass do it? I mean I heard rutting rumors about this ten E-years ago. When governments do a mind wipe, you're back to shitting in your pants and learning to walk."

The doctor steepled his fingers thoughtfully. "My procedure is much more selective than a mind wipe. Emotions have a greater valence in the mind than unemotional facts, and guilt is an especially strong emotion in some. Suppose you wanted to be president of XYZ Corporation by your three hundredth birthday but never made it. Now you are dying and. . ."

Metzger snorted derisively.

"Or maybe you hurt someone you loved, said words that were best left unsaid, or accidentally killed innocent people and have spent your life miserable with guilt as a result."

"Can you really get rid of . . . ass-ramming guilt without removing the good stuff — like food memories?"

"Yes. It's a tedious process. I must follow the thread of your chosen guilt to its very beginnings, which often can go back to childhood. Guilt, being a stronger emotion, can frequently be teased out of a complex emotional gestalt. But, even with my special equipment, this can take days, depending on how much guilt must be expunged, and how far back it goes in the patient's history."

"You won't have to go far with me. Eleven E-years ago I stumbled over this . . . this freak singing bitch who was just begging for it."

To Dr. L'Espoir this explained a lot. Sexual sins! During those eleven years, Metzger could have joined a dozen anti-sex religious cults, which might explain his preoccupation with a clean death. Shame-based religions were once again pandemic.

"No earlier shame you would like erased?"

"Hell, no. I had a great life up until I saw that poisonous freak singer. Can't get her out of my mind." His cold obsidian eyes squirmed in their sockets. "You can do this, huh?"

"I can remove all memory of sins of omission or commission, and unfulfilled goals."

"Well, well. So any little turd can die thinking he's a fat success."

Metzger was wobbling his chins and grinning in a way that made the doctor's stomach turn queasy.

"Can you guarantee you'll get the job done?" — he

wheezed — "before I feed the rutting recyclers?"

"I believe I —"

The fat sausage-fingered hand was aiming for his shirt front again.

L'Espoir fought to keep the panic from his voice. "I guarantee it."

The pale hand returned to the ebony countertop.

"I have friends here who would avenge me, if you fail."

The doctor doubted that Metzger had friends on Jackson Hole, and how could they know if he failed once Metzger was dead?

"You keep records of what you read in a man's mind?" Metzger fidgeted and the plastilike chair complained.

"I am a psychiatrist, and anything I learn about you is strictly confidential. It's the law."

"Like there's law here on Jackson Hole." Metzger sneered, and then winced.

"In any case, I am an ethical man. I *won't* tell, and I'm not a member of any law enforcement agency."

"I bet not!" The man's laugh was liquid, moist like bubbling mucus. "I heard about you on the holo. They want your ass roasted."

He tried not to let his personal feelings about patients affect his work. Despite everything that had happened and what humanity thought, Dr. L'Espoir knew he was a good man, even a compassionate man. His intentions had always been the best. He tried to extend any benevolence he could equally to all sentient beings.

"You are correct," L'Espoir said in his coldest tones, his mind returning instantly to that lurid headline, "Son of First Ambassador to an Alien World Angers Churches." And, to that morning in President Nullarbor's office.

Lavish with ancient Earth furnishings, it smelled of wood and lemon oil. Dr. Nullarbor glared at him from behind what seemed a hectometer of desk.

"Did you see Walters on the net last night? 'God is no longer needed. Professor L'Espoir invented a machine that does away with bad conscience.'"

"Yes." He could barely speak. Having been ignored for so many years as a wealthy dilettante, L'Espoir hadn't expected such rabid media response to his research. "Blood of Christ Not Needed. Machine Removes All Shame!" screamed the headlines of yellow tabloids and church newsletters alike.

Even the *Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychiatry* had skewered him: "Spare the Guilt and Spoil the Personality." Those authors conjectured that artificial removal of guilt would distort personality structure. Only at the very end of this article did they mention that his machine *might* be a boon to humankind.

"My research wasn't carried out with university money, or on university time." His vocal cords were tense.

The device the press called his neuroprogrammer or reprogrammer had been built in his own well-equipped

home laboratory. How academia would laugh if the truth were known. His reprogrammer was simply the accidental by-product of unsuccessful research. He had been hunting for the soul in the subatomic particles of body and brain. He hadn't found the soul, only guilt.

"I never liked you, L'Espoir. You're pompous, arrogant —" He held up a warning hand. "I know you have tenure and I know what your money has done for this school. You're fired!"

At a time when he was lonely and grief-stricken, the churches had condemned him — while every government on every human world wanted his plans, his reprogrammer, his abilities. They more than wanted, they threatened. They hounded. How could he trust the morality of any government?

He blew up his machine and fled.

His had been a long journey from that lemon-scented university office to the stench of Jackson. He had served several years as a physician on a pirate craft, rationalizing that pirates were people, regardless of their morals. They bled. It was convenient to forget that their victims also bled. Besides, the pirates' illicit contacts had helped him acquire the components necessary to build a more complex version of his machine.

L'Espoir's mind abruptly returned from the ruins of his academic life to the matter at hand, and his lips finished the statement he had meant to make. "Indeed, if an auto-da-fé were still legal, I'd probably have been burned at the stake." His tone continued icy. "Describe your guilt."

"No!" Fat hands made fists.

This was a frequent if insane response. Soon he would know everything about this man — except his soul.

In a swift glance of reappraisal, the doctor noted a large pale band on Metzger's left wrist, and several fingers looked as if they had once worn rings. He had probably sold his body chronometer and jewelry somewhere along the way.

"Now, can you afford my services? I ask the equivalent of ten thousand United Galaxy credits."

Monetary exchange was difficult on Jackson Hole. Barter was the norm.

L'Espoir waited anxiously as his obese patient reached into his right breast pocket and pulled out a soft cloth bag. The bag, dumped unceremoniously on the countertop, revealed three Melian crystals that caught the light with a display of scintillating rainbow color.

Dr. L'Espoir was relieved. Usually his terminal patients were poor. If they had decent goods or credit, they had themselves put into the recreation vats and regenerated. These gems were sufficient for his fee, even if they were of the most minimal quality — but not enough for a regeneration however perfect their crystalline structure.

An hour later, Dr. Jean L'Espoir sat in his back office before a console with a hundred and three keys, all of which were backup for a sophisticated voice-

command system restricted to his voice alone.

During his years on Jackson Hole, this computer had been recording the miseries of his patients. In it lived a trillion sorrows, a million defeats, and hundreds of millions of petty crimes all sucked from the brains of despairing humanity. L'Espoir took great pride in this accomplishment.

Its virtual reality component allowed him to experience the complete sensory, mental, and emotional life of his patients. Using virtual reality, he could even visit the atomic or subatomic level of a human being, but he usually preferred to bring that view to the attached two-meter by two-meter hologram pedestal and there symbolically cut and splice, build and destroy. The actual work was done by atom-sized robots (that made retroviruses look like giants) and minute electrical pulses that rearranged neurohormones. Memory formation proteins could be altered or added.

The naked Metzger was sedated, relaxed on a sliding gurney, hooked to catheters to remove the body's waste products, to intravenous fluids to keep him from dehydration, and to a breather to oxygenate his blood. The gurney was slid into an electronic tube. Supersensitive microminiature electrodes covered Metzger's white sluglike body connecting him with the doctor's neural reprogrammer.

A silent prayer trembled on L'Espoir's lips as he asked for guidance in bringing comfort to the afflicted. Out loud, he commanded the machine.

Metzger was right. The most prominent track in his mind concerned food. He had once frequented all the best restaurants on Rigala, L'Espoir's home world. Indeed, Metzger had been among the Galactic Gourmand. Food appeared a dead end. Best to go to the physical pain.

Suddenly the doctor saw the world as Metzger had seen it twenty E-days before — according to Metzger's chronograph. Metzger Eisenhart, in a torment about white hair and desperate for his Angel Blue fix, was in a private room of an elegantly appointed restaurant waiting to meet his drug contact when a cyborg dressed all in tight black synleather came in.

"Mr. Holovid Viper, Mr. Porno Peddler" — the one electronic eye made a minute whizzing noise as it spun into focus — "it's time to pay the piper, or I cut off more than the music." The cyborg's tone was corrosive.

"Look, give me another week. I'll get the goods. I have a lead on a new project . . ."

Metzger was lying. Anything Metzger owned or could steal, he'd trade for Angel Blue. He'd been gambling, hoping to strike it big and feed that greedy hopper in his brain.

Metzger cringed. The cyborg was slipping his shatter gun from its holster.

"Suppose I give you some lovely Melian crystals, just between you and me. You wait until next week to collect —" The cyborg's part-human, part-electronic

glance was almost cryogenic. "Look, I'll give your boss ten of my very best holovids for his exclusive use. Never seen before. Pornography like —"

The cyborg reached behind Metzger, grabbed him by the neck of his jacket and lifted his whole lard-lazy bulk over the table, disturbing only one half-finished bottle of vintage Earth wine.

In the maintenance way behind the restaurant, Metzger received the blast that gave him his soon-to-be terminal indigestion.

This wasn't the first time the doctor had felt a certain repugnance for his patients. Not everyone had the advantage of his moral training, his small-planet upbringing, his age and extensive education. Perhaps the man had actually been producing erotica. On Metzger's home planet, pornography could be legal, acceptable. Different worlds had different ethical structures. The good doctor was proud of his liberality, and reminded himself not to make value judgments.

Metzger's drug habit certainly wasn't new and probably not legal. People turn to drugs for a reason and that reason might reveal the source of the guilt that plagued him. L'Espoir took a deep breath before plunging on. His lips commanded and thousands of thin-sliced views of Metzger's brain appeared and rotated in space, turning in an instant into maps of what seemed unending pathways, all interconnected in all known dimensions. Some pathways were more worn than others.

Like bloodhounds, the doctor and his computer sniffed out feelings about white hair and drug memories, backing up across the years to the first time this patient had dermal-patched Angel Blue.

Metzger was unable to sleep. This had never happened to him before. He woke up in a sweat, cringing with intense guilt, remembering silky white hair and large violet eyes. This was impossible. He couldn't be feeling guilt. Why was this one rutting half-breed broad any different? White silky hair; violet eyes. Such emotion. Such pathos. Metzger was crying. He had never before cried as an adult.

Soon he was asleep again and remembering, reliving in minute detail that evening at the club, that whole hideous night.

The contents of Metzger's mind startled the doctor. He recognized The Dream Machine Club on Rigala and the white-haired half-human, half-Cetian empathic emoter singing on its stage. Her hauntingly lovely voice sang of relationships and life.

Here is where Metzger's guilt was born, the first in his long hedonistic life. Screaming in psychic misery, Metzger awakened to call a derm peddler for special delivery.

With sudden morbid comprehension, Dr. L'Espoir escaped the virtual reality of Metzger's viewpoint, turning instead to the remoteness of holo display. His

left temporal artery bulged.

He found himself the prisoner of emotions he had never allowed himself to experience before — all of an intensity that astonished him. His own guilt was aroused and memory made it a monster that sat on his chest and robbed him of breath. Guilt then hauled him by the heels down long stairs, his head bumping on each step, on each hard truth. His heart pounded, his mind plummeted down and down into the pit. Abilities unsuspected and capacities untried came to his consciousness.

The holo display now showed Metzger's sweaty hands groping for a patch of Angel Blue.

Trembling all over, Dr. L'Espoir quit his connection with Metzger's mind, rapidly gathered up all that passed for his portable wealth on Jackson, including the Melian crystals, and made arrangements for the unconscious Metzger's transference to a regeneration tank, as his uncle, his unlucky uncle. His gut would be healed. L'Espoir would pay the man's regeneration bill.

Back at work again, L'Espoir's fingers played and the represented neurons of his patient's brain danced. Sweat poured from L'Espoir's forehead. The computer image of Metzger's memories began to change. Twenty-four weary hours later, L'Espoir stumbled into his front office and was leaning over to pull a pint bottle from the bottom drawer of the electro-receptionist when he saw Sunde, her nose pressed to the plastiglass of his window, like a child staring into a candy store. She backed up and smiled shyly. Her smile vanished, however, when she saw L'Espoir tip the pint bottle to his mouth.

Every day for a week, Sunde's elfin features appeared outside his window. And every day for a week, L'Espoir drank. During this time he even turned away paying customers to continue his work on the computer representation of Metzger's memories.

One morning, he did interview a customer. "Do you have a certificate of terminality or suicide?" he asked as he gazed toward his window. Sunde had grown progressively thinner; there were now purple pouches under her eyes.

The man presented his certificate as L'Espoir punched up the current list of the dying and suicidal. This customer was a terminal with the occupation of security executive, the local euphemism for paid assassin. At the end of the suicide list L'Espoir saw: Sunde, *musikfinder*.

He took an almost hysterical gulp of air as rage surged through him. He ran around the electro-receptionist and out his front door. How could she do this? How could she afford a suicide implant? No one would pay a *musikfinder* that much. He knew the answer to his question. Prostitution.

"Why?" he screamed.

Sunde cowered as if he might hit her. "Not strong," she said. "Pain." Sunde walked off, slump-shouldered, her paper garment nearly falling from her slim body.

A week later, Metzger Eisenhart was returned to the

doctor, still unconscious, regenerated, slim, and good for at least another E-century.

L'Espoir smiled indulgently upon the man who was still unconscious, once again strapped onto his gurney, and soon to be clutched by his electronic ring, poked by catheters, and covered with electrodes. His excess of white flabby flesh was now replaced by well-toned muscle. For a split second, the doctor envied Metzger his new-made body that smelled so pure, so clean.

For three more days, L'Espoir hammered away, sleeplessly reprogramming the old mind in that new body. Tormented as he was, he could never have slept. He drank steadily.

He finally brought Eisenhart to consciousness, but did not yet give him access to his long-term memory, and kept him restrained bodily — except for eye movement — both by chemicals and belts. Metzger's dark eyes flickered awake.

"I've waited a long time for you, Metzger. I found your little problem and cured it. A deficiency in affection, an inability to feel for others, to put yourself in their place."

Metzger's eyes glanced a piercing question and probably a curse.

"In previous unlightened times, you might have been called a sociopath. Like other sociopaths you were very successful at making money, at least until you met that half-human, half-Cetian empathic emoter singing in The Dream Machine. The press had fun with her: 'Half-Cetian Sings the Blues for Professor Hubby.'"

"Cetian songs are always about" — his voice failed — "ethical problems, and she was loved by many in our university town. Because of her parentage, she had a special ability to make others feel. You kidnapped her, raped her, and tortured her for your holovid cameras — to feast the sickness of some minds. She was forced to perform vile sexual acts. Partially flayed alive and kept living by drugs and machines, she was made to. . ." His mind balked; his lips refused to name the agony. "She performed one act you never expected. She made *even* you feel for her. Pity this didn't keep you from murdering others."

Metzger's eyes seemed huge now, and mad.

"Oh, yes, I traveled through your mind, as best I could — like wading through infested sewage. I discovered something horrific, more terrible than I would ever have believed possible fifteen E-years or even fifteen E-days ago. I discovered the full depth of my own guilt. You see, she had the same effect on me, and I'll never be able to forget her. Because of you, I have discovered that my much vaunted compassion is a sham."

L'Espoir moved a wheelchair up next to Metzger and began deftly removing catheters and electrodes. He undid the belts and gave his patient yet another injection.

Dr. L'Espoir leaned over Metzger, deliberately breathing alcohol fumes into his face. "At your whim thousands died horrible deaths. You, who brought death

without compassion, will now receive life from someone whose compassion is a fraud."

Metzger's eyes rolled wildly like those of a trapped animal.

"You see, our meeting was destiny. That half-human, half-Cetian woman was my wife of three E-years. She was still young, only an E-century, and writing her dissertation on neurophysics and working weekend evenings singing at The Dream Machine." L'Espoir's voice was strained through tightly clenched teeth. "I was supposed to pick her up after her last set, but I was solving the problems of the universe and forgot the hour — thus giving you and your henchmen the opportunity to kidnap her."

"Not until I visited your mind did I know what had happened to her. The authorities implied that she had left me because of all my adverse publicity. I even suspected that some government had taken her to trade for my cooperation. But, over the years, no evidence evolved to support this theory."

Saliva oozed from Metzger's lips.

"Admittedly, I hadn't been a very attentive husband. She was truly innocent, loving, sweet, and — however inadvertently — my garrulous nature caused her agonizing death. My last words to her were unkind. Remorse and loneliness nearly destroyed me."

Metzger groaned.

The doctor's voice dropped to a guttural whisper. "You who were talented at assigning all failures and shortcomings to others, you who had never felt a moment of guilt or remorse or a twinge of shame before finding Aelia, will now remember nothing but failure, shame, guilt, and remorse."

Metzger's eyes were aflame with anger and his body twitched violently as the doctor hauled him up and shoved him into a wheelchair. He gave the man one last injection, then punched his alarm button just before he punched his door open. Once out the door, the doctor dumped Metzger's limp body into the street, then threw his now too large clothes on top of him.

L'Espoir looked around for Ms. Sunde but didn't see her. Most of the population was attending the knife duels. Fake Earth stars shown overhead while shadows crowded each other in the street.

"I expunged what joy I could search out in your mind. You'll find no pleasure now, or ever again, in others' pain. You'll never recall the taste of your favorite foods, the softness of a caress, and I did a core dump of the misery files of my reprogrammer right into your filthy fat skull."

Had he seen someone move in the shadows? Had the Goons arrived?

"You'll feel immensely guilty for late arrivals, for forgetting natal days, for flunking tests, for any indecency."

Slumped against the wall, Metzger began fighting to regain more use of his body. He made an ancient and lewd hand gesture with a middle finger. "I'll . . . I'll buy

a suicide" He choked. A look of horror came to his face.

"Suicide is a sin; and besides, they won't sell you a suicide machine." L'Espoir seemed to admire his manicure as he recalled his visit with Jackson's Administrator.

He was escorted past a dozen men and women cooling their heels outside the door.

In that white box of an office, there was no seat for a guest; but there was a caged tracking-laser. Roasting a guest was acceptable; burning a hole in the bulkhead was not.

"My Uncle Metzger Eisenhart may desire to buy a suicide or to provoke his own death at the hands of your men," L'Espoir said to the nondescript little man behind the large desk, a man who went by no other name than Administrator.

"Metzger Eisenhart." The Administrator tapped a few keys on his desk and a picture of the obese Eisenhart appeared on the desktop. "He was terminal," said the Administrator as he glanced up with questioning eyes. "You bought him a regeneration."

"I emphatically request that he not come to harm in any way."

"Emphatically request . . . !"

L'Espoir's temerity led to a heated discussion and the demand for a huge bribe. The doctor found himself saying, "I bring millions" — each word enunciated like a precise little bite — "in goods to this world."

"You bring fertilizer!" the man spat, his face like stone, his words like acid.

"The same thing! If you could find a corrupt scientist intelligent enough to understand my machine, I would have been dead long ago." L'Espoir closed the gap between himself and the desk. The warning light on the laser pulsed. "I'm not afraid of eviction." He suddenly knew he wanted this revenge more than life itself. "I'm willing to leave, dead or alive. But I will take my machine with me. . . in a blaze of glory, so to speak." He hadn't wired this machine to self-destruct, but the Administrator didn't know that.

A few minutes later, L'Espoir came to an understanding with the Administrator.

"You will buy no death on this world," L'Espoir said as his thoughts came back to the man squirming at his feet. "And now your health is extraordinarily good. Atomic-sized assemblers of my own invention wait in your blood to correct any ill, any injury." He had invented no such assemblers. "No poison or mind-altering drug will help. You'll have to find some new way to assuage your misery." In an especially coy and affected tone he added, "I suggest sucking vacuum. Or, perhaps you'd like your mind wiped and your bottom wiped when you shit in your pants."

"You'll experience keen misery for not making technocrat of the year. A billion mind-meddling demons will afflict you."

"You" — Metzger snarled — "you father-rutting

asspice cockroach."

L'Espoir lounged against his storefront, arms folded over his chest. "You seem to have plumbed your earliest memories — obscenities you learned, no doubt, at your mother's knee."

"You crap-faced, freako mad scientist, who appointed you God?"

"That comment minus the obscenities is more or less what my beautiful wife said to me the evening of the night you abducted her." He unfolded his arms and began to pace restlessly around his victim.

"I'll kill —" Metzger moaned. His angry eyes suddenly went sad. "K-krist on a —"

"I did wonderfully detailed work on you, work I didn't believe possible. Guilt I knew I could destroy, but I had never before tried other more delicate emotions. Too bad I didn't think to reprogram your vocabulary."

"I'll kill. . ." Metzger began to cry, great sobs soon racking his slim body.

Dr. L'Espoir laughed. The neon scarlet of his sign played over Metzger's newly revised body. "Success Unlimited, Success Unlimited," the sign flashed repetitively. A visceral sense of ultimate despair gripped L'Espoir. He knew there was no success for him. Whatever a soul might be, his was corrupted forever.

The fire ax that hung on a wall two storefronts down caught his eye. He grabbed it up and returned to hover menacingly over Metzger, enjoying the man's abject terror. Insane laughter rippled in his throat. "Maybe we should test my new assemblers by chopping off a leg."

Ms. Sunde crept from the shadows and laid a gentle hand on L'Espoir's tense right forearm. "No, Doctoree, do not do this thing."

In his fervid concentration, L'Espoir shook her off, as if Sunde were a fly. "Should my programming prove unsuccessful, there's always the Goon Squad. For now, they are under orders not to kill you, just to escort you out. Hope you live a long, long time. Hope you have many nightmares, Metzger."

"Aelia's silky white hair and violet eyes will haunt you as long as you live and be there in your brain when you finally manage to die."

L'Espoir's palm slapped his door open; he ran for the back room. Sunde sped in after him and put her tiny self between him and his reprogrammer.

"What, Doc-tor-ee, are you do-ing?" Her voice shook.

Self-loathing assailed him. How could he have possibly thought he was more moral, more . . . ? He raised the ax over her head, over his machine. "I created an absolute power and I am not strong enough to use it. I must destroy my machine before it destroys all morality." L'Espoir took another threatening step toward his machine, toward Sunde.

"Help me," Sunde pleaded.

L'Espoir swung the ax furiously back over his shoulder.

"Your machine? No! No! Please no," she cried. She

ripped off her paper jumper and climbed nude onto his gurney. "Help me *feel* forgiveness."

L'Espoir's voice was harsh. "You would allow a liar, a torturer, a brutal, amoral man to operate upon the atoms of your mind?"

She nodded through her tears.

He let the ax clatter to the floor. Noise outside. The Goons had arrived, late as usual.

"How can you possibly trust me?"

"I trust." Her voice was small.

"I don't." He turned his face away from her.

Heather Valencia

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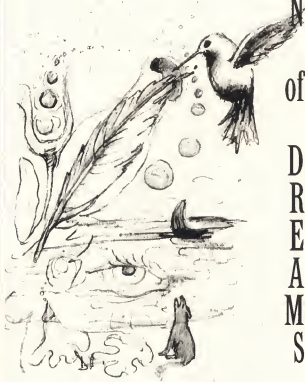
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"You . . . your machine . . . are the hands of God."

"What a savage god to have such vicious hands."

L'Espoir turned back; tears streamed down his face.

"God just to those who deserve. Mercy to those who deserve."

L'Espoir stroked her light blue hair as he glued electrodes to her scalp. Such soft, silky hair.

"Yes, mercy to those who deserve."

—JACQUELINE F. FALKENHAN

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LULUNGOMEENA

By GORDON R. DICKSON

Illustrated by Hart

Blame Clay Harbank, if you will, for what happened at Station 563 of the Sirius Sector; or blame William Peterborough, whom we called the Kid. I blame no one. But I am a Dorsai man.

The trouble began the day the Kid joined the station, with his quick hands and his gambler's mind, and found that Clay, alone of all the men there, would not gamble with him — for all that he claimed to having been a gambling man himself. And so it ran on for our years of service together.

But the beginning of the end was the day they came off shift together.

They had been out on a duty circuit of the frontier station that housed the twenty of us — searching the outer bubble for signs of blows or leaks. It's a slow two hour tramp, that duty, even outside the station on the surface of the asteroid where there's no gravity to speak of. We, in the recreation room, off duty, could tell by the sound of their voices as the inner port sucked open and the clanging clash of them removing their spacesuits came echoing to us along the metal corridor, that the Kid had been needing Clay through the whole tour.

"Another day," came the Kid's voice, "another fifty credits. And how's the piggy bank coming along, Clay?"

There was a slight pause, and I could see Clay carefully controlling his features and his voice. Then his

pleasant baritone, softened by the burr of his Tarsusian accent, came smoothly to us.

"Like a gentleman, Kid," he answered. "He never overeats and so he runs no danger of indigestion."

It was a neat answer, based on the fact that the Kid's own service account was swollen with his winnings from the rest of the crew. But the Kid was too thick-skinned for rapier thrusts. He laughed; and they finished removing their equipment and came on into the recreation room.

They made a striking picture as they entered, for they were enough alike to be brothers — although father and son would have been a more likely relationship, considering the difference in their ages. Both were tall, dark, wide-shouldered men with lean faces, but experience had weathered the softer lines from Clay's face and drawn thin parentheses about the corners of his mouth. There were other differences, too; but you could see in the Kid the youth that Clay had been, and in Clay the man that the Kid would some day be.

"Hi, Clay," I said.

"Hello, Mort," he said, sitting down beside me.

"Hi, Mort," said the Kid.

I ignored him; and for a moment he tensed. I could see the anger flame up in the ebony depths of his black pupils under the heavy eyebrows. He was a big man; but I come from the Dorsai Planets and a Dorsai man fights to the death, if he fights at all. And, in consequence, among ourselves, we of Dorsai are a polite people.

But politeness was wasted on the Kid — as was Clay's delicate irony. With men like the Kid, you have to use a club.

We were in bad shape. The twenty of us at Frontier Station 563, on the periphery of the human area just

beyond Sirius, had gone sour, and half the men had applications in for transfer. The trouble between Clay and the Kid was splitting the station wide open.

We were all in the Frontier Service for money; that was the root of the trouble. Fifty credits a day is good pay — but you have to sign up for a ten year hitch. You can buy yourself out — but that costs a hundred thousand. Figure it out for yourself. Nearly six years if you saved every penny you got. So most go in with the idea of staying the full decade.

That was Clay's idea. He had gambled most of his life away. He had won and lost several fortunes. Now he was getting old and tired and he wanted to go back — Lulungomeena, on the little planet of Tarsus, which was the place he had come from as a young man.

But he was through with gambling. He said money made that way never stuck, but ran away again like quicksilver. So he drew his pay and banked it.

But the Kid was out for a killing. Four years of play with the rest of the crew had given him more than enough to buy his way out and leave him a nice stake. And perhaps he would have done just that, if it hadn't been that the Service account of Clay's drew him like an El Dorado. He could not go off and leave it. So he stayed with the outfit, riding the older man unmercifully.

He harped continually on two themes. He pretended to disbelieve that Clay had ever been a gambler; and he derided Lulungomeena, Clay's birthplace: the older man's goal and dream, and the one thing he could be drawn into talk about. For, to Clay, Lulungomeena was beautiful, the most wonderful spot in the Universe; and with an old man's sick longing for home, he could not help saying so.

"Mort," said the Kid, ignoring the rebuff and sitting down beside us, "what's a Hixabrod like?"

My club had not worked so well, after all. Perhaps, I, too, was slipping. Next to Clay, I was the oldest man on the crew, which was why we were close friends. I scowled at the Kid.

"Why?" I asked.

"We're having one for a visitor," he said.

Immediately, all talk around the recreation room ceased and all attention was focused on the Kid. All aliens had to clear through a station like ours when they crossed the frontier from one of the other great galactic power groups into human territory. But isolated as Station 563 was, it was seldom an alien came our way, and when one did, it was an occasion.

Even Clay succumbed to the general interest. "I didn't know that," he said. "How'd you find out?"

"The notice came in over the receiver when you were down checking the atmosphere plant," answered the Kid with a careless wave of his hand. "I'd already filed it when you came up. What'll he be like, Mort?"

I had knocked around more than any of them — even Clay. This was my second stretch in the Service. I remembered back about twenty years, to the Denebian

Trouble.

"Stiff as a poker," I said. "Proud as Lucifer, honest as sunlight and tight as a camel on his way through the eye of a needle. Sort of a humanoid, but with a face like a collie dog. You know the Hixabrodian reputation, don't you?"

Somebody at the back of the crowd said no, although they may have been doing it just to humor me. Like Clay with his Lulungomeena, old age was making me garrulous.

"They're the first and only mercenary ambassadors in the known Universe," I said. "A Hixabrod can be hired, but he can't be influenced, bribed or forced to come up with anything but the cold truth — and, brother, it's cold the way a Hixabrod serves it up to you. That's why they're so much in demand. If any kind of political dispute comes up, from planetary to inter-alien power group levels, both sides have to hire a Hixabrod to represent them in the discussions. That way they know the other side is being honest with them. The opposing Hixabrod is a living guarantee of that."

"He sounds good," said the Kid. "What say we get together and throw him a good dinner during his twenty-four hour stop-over?"

"You won't get much in the way of thanks from him," I grunted. "They aren't built that way."

"Let's do it anyway," said the Kid. "Be a little excitement for a change."

A murmur of approval ran through the room. I was outvoted. Even Clay liked the idea.

"Hixabrods eat what we eat, don't they?" asked the Kid, making plans. "Okay, then, soups, salad, meats, champagne and brandy —" he ran on, ticking the items off on his fingers. For a moment, his enthusiasm had us all with him. But then, just at the end, he couldn't resist getting in one more dig at Clay.

"Oh, yes," he finished, "and for entertainment, you can tell him about Lulungomeena, Clay."

Clay winced — not obviously, but we all saw a shadow cross his face. Lulungomeena on Tarsus, his birthplace, held the same sort of obsession for him that his Service account held for the Kid; but he could not help being aware that he was prone to let his tongue run away on the subject of its beauty. For it was where he belonged, in the stomach-twisting, throat-aching way that sometimes only talk can relieve.

I was a Dorsai man and older than the rest. I understood. No one should make fun of the bond tying a man to his home world. It is as real as it is intangible. And to joke about it is cruel.

But the Kid was too young to know that yet. He was fresh from Earth — Earth, where none of the rest of us had been, yet which, hundreds of years before, had been the origin of us all. He was eager and strong and contemptuous of emotion. He saw, as the rest of us recognized also, that Clay's tendency to let his talk wander ever to the wonder of Lulungomeena was the

first slight crack in what had once been a man of unflawed steel. It was the first creeping decay of age.

But, unlike the rest of us, who hid our boredom out of sympathy, the Kid saw here a chance to break Clay and his resolution to do no more gambling. So he struck out constantly at this one spot so deeply vital that Clay's self-possession was no defense.

Now, at this last blow, the little fires of anger gathered in the older man's eyes.

"That's enough," he said harshly. "Leave Lulungomeena out of the discussion."

"I'm willing to," said the Kid. "But somehow you keep reminding me of it. That and the story that you once were a gambler. If you won't prove the last one, how can you expect me to believe all you say about the first?"

The veins stood out on Clay's forehead; but he controlled himself.

"I've told you a thousand times," he said between his teeth. "Money made by gambling doesn't stick. You'll find that out for yourself one of these days."

"Words," said the Kid airily. "Only words."

For a second, Clay stood staring whitey at him, not even breathing. I don't know if the Kid realized his danger or cared, but I didn't breathe, either, until Clay's chest expanded and he turned abruptly and walked out of the recreation room. We heard his footsteps die away down the corridor toward his room in the dormitory section.

Later, I braced the Kid about it. It was his second shift time, when most of the men in the recreation room had to go on duty. I ran the Kid to the ground in the galley where he was fixing himself a sandwich. He looked up, a little startled, more than a little on the defensive, as I came in.

"Oh, hi, Mort," he said with a pretty good imitation of casualness. "What's up?"

"You," I told him. "Are you looking for a fight with Clay?"

"No," he drawled with his mouth full. "I wouldn't exactly say that."

"Well, that's what you're liable to get."

"Look, Mort," he said, and then paused until he had swallowed. "Don't you think Clay's old enough to look after himself?"

I felt a slight and not unpleasant shiver run down between my shoulder-blades and my eyes began to grow hot. It was my Dorsai blood again. It must have showed on my face, for the Kid, who had been sitting negligently on one edge of the galley table, got up in a hurry.

"Hold on, Mort," he said. "Nothing personal."

I fought the old feeling down and said as calmly as I could, "I just dropped by to tell you something. Clay has been around a lot longer than you have. I'd advise you to lay off him."

"Afraid he'll get hurt?"

"No," I answered. "I'm afraid you will."

The Kid snorted with sudden laughter, half choking on his sandwich. "Now I get it. You think I'm too young to take care of myself."

"Something like that, but not the way you think. I want to tell you something about yourself and you don't have to say whether I'm right or wrong — you'll let me know without words."

"Hold it," he said, turning red. "I didn't come out here to get psyched."

"You'll get it just the same. And it's not for you only — it's for all of us, because men thrown together as closely as we are choose up sides whenever there's conflict, and that's as dangerous for the rest of us as it is for you."

"Then the rest of you can stay out of it."

"We can't," I said. "What affects one of us affects us all. Now I'll tell you what you're doing. You came out here expecting to find glamour and excitement. You found monotony and boredom instead, not realizing that that's what space is like almost all the time."

He picked up his coffee container. "And now you'll say I'm trying to create my own excitement at Clay's expense. Isn't that the standard line?"

"I wouldn't know; I'm not going to use it, because that's not how I see what you're doing. Clay is adult enough to stand the monotony and boredom if they'll get him what he wants. He's also learned how to live with others and with himself. He doesn't have to prove himself by beating down somebody either half or twice his age."

He took a drink and set the container down on the table. "And I do?"

"All youngsters do. It's their way of experimenting with their potentialities and relationships with other people. When they find that out, they can give it up — they're mature then — although some never do. I think you will, eventually. The sooner you stop doing it here, though, the better it'll be for you and us."

"And if I don't?" he challenged.

"This isn't college back on Earth or some other nice, safe home planet, where hazing can be a nuisance, but where it's possible to escape it by going somewhere else. There isn't any 'somewhere else' here. Unless the one doing the hazing sees how reckless and dangerous it is, the one getting hazed takes it as long as he can — and then something happens."

"So it's Clay you're really worried about, after all."

"Look, get it through your skull. Clay's a man and he's been through worse than this before. You haven't. If anybody's going to get hurt, it'll be you."

He laughed and headed for the corridor door. He was still laughing as it slammed behind him. I let him go. There's no use pushing a bluff after it's failed to work.

The next day, the Hixabrod came. His name was Dor Lassos. He was typical of his race, taller than the tallest of his race, taller than the tallest of us by half a head,

with a light green skin and that impassive Hixabrodian canine face.

I missed his actual arrival, being up in the observation tower checking meteor paths. The station itself was well protected, but some of the ships coming in from time to time could have gotten in trouble with a few of the larger ones that slipped by us at intervals in that particular sector. When I did get free, Dor Lassos had already been assigned to his quarters and the time of official welcoming was over.

I went down to see him anyhow on the off-chance that we had mutual acquaintances either among his race or mine. Both of our peoples are few enough in number, God knows, so the possibility wasn't too far-fetched. And, like Clay, I yearned for anything connected with my home.

"*Wer velt d'hatchen, Hixabrod* —" I began, walking into his apartment — and stopped short.

The Kid was there. He looked at me with an odd expression on his face.

"Do you speak Hixabrodian?" he asked incredulously.

I nodded. I had learned it on extended duty during the Denebian Trouble. Then I remembered my manners and turned back to the Hixabrod; but he was already started on his answer.

"*En gles Ter, I tu, Dorsaiven*," returned the collie face, expressionlessly. "*Da Tr'amgen lang. Met zurres nebent?*"

"*Em getluc. Me mi Dorsai fene. Nono ne — ves luc Les Lassos?*"

He shook his head.

Well, it had been a shot in the dark anyway. There was only the faintest chance that he had known our old interpreter at the time of the Denebian Trouble. The Hixabrods have no family system of nomenclature. They take their names from the names of older Hixabrods they admire or like. I bowed politely to him and left.

It was not until later that it occurred to me to wonder what in the Universe the Kid could find to talk about with a Hixabrod.

I actually was worried about Clay. Since my bluff with the Kid had failed, I thought I might perhaps try with Clay himself. At first I waited for an opportune moment to turn up; but following the last argument with the Kid, he'd been sticking to his quarters. I finally scrapped the casual approach and went to see him.

I found him in his quarters, reading. It was a little shocking to find that tall, still athletic figure in a dressing gown like an old man, eyes shaded by the lean fingers of one long hand, poring over the little glow of a scanner with the lines unreeling before his eyes. But he looked up as I came in, and the smile on his face was the smile I had grown familiar with over four years of close living together.

"What's that?" I asked, nodding at the book scanner.

He set it down and the little light went out, the lines

stopped unreeling.

"A bad novel," he said, smiling, "by a poor author. But they're both Tarsusian."

I took the chair he had indicated. "Mind if I speak straight out, Clay?"

"Go ahead," he invited.

"The Kid," I said bluntly. "And you. The two of you can't go on this way."

"Well, old fire-eater," answered Clay lightly, "what've you got to suggest?"

"Two things. And I want you to think both of them over carefully before answering. First, we see if we can't get up a nine-tenths majority here in the station and petition him out as incompatible."

Clay slowly shook his head. "We can't do that, Mort."

"I think I can get the signatures if I ask it," I said. "Everybody's pretty tired of him . . . They'd come across."

"It's not that and you know it," said Clay. "Transfer by petition isn't supposed to be prejudicial, but you and I know it is. He'd be switched to some hardcase station, get in worse trouble there, and end up in a penal post generally shot to hell. He'd know who to blame for it, and he'd hate us for the rest of his life."

"What of it? Let him hate us."

"I'm a Tarsusian. It'd bother me and I couldn't do it."

"All right," I said. "Dropping that, then, you've got nearly seven years in, total, and half the funds you need to buy out. I've got nearly enough saved, in spite of myself, to make up the rest. In addition, for your retirement, I'll sign over to you my pay for the three years I've got left. Take that and get out of the Service. It isn't what you figured on having, but half a loaf . . ."

"And how about your home-going?" he asked.

"Look at me."

He looked; and I knew what he was seeing — the broken nose, the scars, the lined face — the Dorsai face.

"I'll never go home," I said.

He sat looking at me for a long moment more, and I fancied I saw a little light burn deep in back of his eyes. But then the light went out and I knew that I'd lost with him, too.

"Maybe not," he said quietly. "But I'm not going to be the one that keeps you from it."

I left him to his book.

Shifts are supposed to run continuously, with someone on duty all the time. However, for special occasions, like this dinner we had arranged for the Hixabrod, it was possible, by getting work done ahead of time and picking the one four hour stretch during the twenty-four when there were no messages or ships due in, to assemble everybody in the station on an off-duty basis.

So we were all there that evening, in the recreation

room, which had been cleared and set up with a long table for the dinner. We finished our cocktails, sat down at the table and the meal began.

As it will, the talk during the various courses turned to things outside the narrow limits of our present lives. Remembrances of places visited, memories of an earlier life, and the comparison of experiences, some of them pretty weird, were the materials of which our table talk was built.

Unconsciously, all of us were trying to draw the Hixabrod out. But he sat in his place at the head of the table between Clay and myself, with the Kid a little farther down, preserving a frosty silence until the dessert had been disposed of and the subject of Media unexpectedly came up.

"— Media," said the Kid. "I've heard of Media. It's a little planet, but it's supposed to have everything from soup to nuts on it in the way of life. There's one little life-form there that's claimed to contain something of value to every metabolism. It's called — let me see now — it's called —"

"It is called *nygti*," supplied Dor Lassos, suddenly, in a metallic voice. "A small quadruped with a highly complex nervous system and a good deal of fatty tissue. I visited the planet over eighty years ago, before it was actually opened up to general travel. The food stores spoiled and we had the opportunity of testing out the theory that it will provide sustenance for almost any kind of known intelligent being."

He stopped.

"Well?" demanded the Kid. "Since you're here to tell the story, I assume the animal kept you alive."

"I and the humans aboard the ship found the *nygti* quite nourishing," said Dor Lassos. "Unfortunately, we had several Micrushni from Polaris also aboard."

"And those?" asked someone.

"A highly developed but in-elastic life-form," said Dor Lassos, sipping from his brandy glass. "They went into convulsions and died."

I had had some experience with Hixabrodian ways and I knew that it was not sadism, but a complete detachment that had prompted this little anecdote. But I could see a wave of distaste ripple down the room. No life-form is so universally well liked as the Micrushni, a delicate iridescent jellyfishlike race with a bent toward poetry and philosophy.

The men at the table drew away almost visibly from Dor Lassos. But that affected him no more than if they had applauded loudly. Only in very limited ways are the Hixabrod capable of empathy where other races are concerned.

"That's too bad," said Clay slowly. "I have always liked the Micrushni." He had been drinking somewhat heavily and the seemingly innocuous statement came out like a half-challenge.

Dor Lassos' cold brown eyes turned and rested on him. Whatever he saw, whatever conclusions he came to,

however, were hidden behind his emotionless face.

"In general," he said flatly, "a truthful race."

That was the closest a Hixabrod could come to praise, and I expected the matter to drop there. But the Kid spoke up again.

"Not like us humans," he said. "Eh, Dor Lassos?"

I glared at him from behind Dor Lassos' head. But he went recklessly on.

"I said, 'Not like us humans, eh?'" he repeated loudly. The Kid had also apparently been drinking freely, and his voice grated on the sudden silence of the room.

"The human race varies," stated the Hixabrod emotionlessly. "You have some individuals who approach truth. Otherwise, the human race is not notably truthful."

It was a typical, deadly accurate Hixabrodian response. Dor Lassos would have answered in the same words if his throat was to have been cut for them the minute they left his mouth. Again, it should have shut the Kid up, and again it apparently failed.

"Ah, yes," said the Kid. "Some approach truth, but in general we are untruthful. But you see, Dor Lassos, a certain amount of human humor is associated with lies. Some of us tell lies just for fun."

Dor Lassos drank from his brandy glass and said nothing.

"Of course," the Kid went on, "sometimes a human thinks he's being funny with his lies when he isn't. Some lies are just boring, particularly when you're forced to hear them over and over again. But on the other hand, there are some champion liars who are so good that even you would find their untruths humorous."

Clay sat upright suddenly, and the sudden start of his movement sent the brandy slopping out over the rim of his glass and onto the white tablecloth. He stared at the Kid.

I looked at them all — at Clay, at the Kid and at Dor Lassos; and an ugly premonition began to form in my brain.

"I do not believe I should," said Dor Lassos.

"Ah, but you should listen to a real expert," said the Kid feverishly, "when he has a good subject to work on. Now, for example, take the matter of home worlds. What is your home world, Hixa, like?"

I had heard enough and more than enough to confirm the suspicion forming within me. Without drawing any undue attention to myself, I rose and left the room.

The alien made a dry sound in his throat and his voice followed me as I went swiftly down the empty corridor.

"It is very beautiful," he said in his adding machine tones. "Hixa has a diameter of thirty-eight thousand universal meters. It possesses twenty-three great mountain ranges and seventeen large bodies of salt water"

The sound of his voice died away and I left it behind me.

I went directly through the empty corridors and up the ladder to the communications shack. I went in the door without pausing, without — in neglect of all duty rules — glancing at the automatic printer to see if any fresh message out of routine had arrived, without bothering to check the transmitter to see that it was keyed into the automatic location signal for approaching spacecraft.

All this I ignored and went directly to the file where the incoming messages are kept.

I flickered the tab and went back to the file of two days previous, skimming through the thick sheaf of transcripts under that dateline. And there, beneath the heading "Notices of Arrivals," I found it, the message announcing the coming of Dor Lassos. I ran my finger down past the statistics on our guest to the line of type that told me where the Hixabrod's last stop had been.

Tarsus.

Clay was my friend. And there is a limit to what a man can take without breaking. On a wall of the communications shack was a roster of the men at our station. I drew the Dorsai sign against the name of William Peterborough, and checked my gun out of the arms locker.

I examined the magazine. It was loaded. I replaced the magazine, put the gun inside my jacket, and went back to the dinner.

Dor Lassos was still talking.

"... The flora and the fauna are maintained in such excellent natural balance that no local surplus has exceeded one per cent of the normal population for any species in the last sixty thousand years. Life on Hixa is regular and predictable. The weather is controlled within the greatest limits of feasibility."

As I took my seat, the machine voice of the Hixabrod hesitated for just a moment, then gathered itself, and went on: "One day I shall return there."

"A pretty picture," said the Kid. He was leaning forward over the table now, his eyes bright, his teeth bared in a smile. "A very attractive home world. But I regret to inform you, Dor Lassos, that I've been given to understand that it pales into insignificance when compared to one other spot in the Galaxy."

The Hixabrod are warriors, too. Dor Lassos' features remained expressionless, but his voice deepened and rang through the room.

"Your planet?"

"I wish it were," returned the Kid with the same wolfish smile. "I wish I could lay claim to it. But this place is so wonderful that I doubt if I would be allowed there. In fact," the Kid went on, "I have never seen it. But I have been hearing about it for some years now. And either it is the most wonderful place in the Universe, or else the man who has been telling me about it —"

I pushed my chair back and started to rise, but Clay's hand clamped on my arm and held me down.

"You were saying —" he said to the Kid, who had

been interrupted by my movement.

"— The man who has been telling me about it," said the Kid, deliberately, "is one of those champion liars I was telling Dor Lassos about."

Once more I tried to get to my feet, but Clay was there before me. Tall and stiff, he stood at the end of the table.

"My right —" he said out of the corner of his mouth to me.

Slowly and with meaning, he picked up his brandy glass and threw the glass straight into the Kid's face. It bounced on the table in front of him and sent brandy flying over the front of the Kid's immaculate dress uniform.

"Get your gun!" ordered Clay.

Now the Kid was on his feet. In spite of the fact that I knew he had planned this, emotion had gotten the better of him at the end. His face was white with rage. He leaned on the edge of the table and fought with himself to carry it through as he had originally intended.

"Why guns?" he said. His voice was thick with restraint, as he struggled to control himself.

"You called me a liar."

"Will guns tell me if you are?" The Kid straightened up, breathing more easily; and his laugh was harsh in the room. "Why use guns when it's possible to prove the thing one way or another with complete certainty?" His gaze swept the room and came back to Clay.

"For years now you've been telling me all sorts of things," he said. "But two things you've told me more than all the rest. One was that you used to be a gambler. The other was that Lulungomeena — your precious Lulungomeena on Tarsus — was the most wonderful place in the Universe. Is either one of those the truth?"

Clay's breath came thick and slow.

"They're both the truth," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"Will you back that up?"

"With my life!"

"Ah," said the Kid mockingly, holding up his forefinger, "but I'm not asking you to back those statements up with your life — but with that neat little hoard you've been accumulating these past years. You claimed you're a gambler. Will you bet that those statements are true?"

Now, for the first time, Clay seemed to see the trap.

"Bet with me," invited the Kid, almost lightly. "That will prove the first statement."

"And what about the second?" demanded Clay.

"Why —" the Kid gestured with his hand toward Dor Lassos — "what further judge do we need? We have here at our table a Hixabrod." Half-turning to the alien, the Kid made him a little bow. "Let him say whether your second statement is true or not."

Once more I tried to rise from my seat and again Clay's hand shoved me down. He turned to Dor Lassos.

"Do you think you could judge such a point, sir?" he

asked.

The brown inhuman eyes met his and held for a long moment.

"I have just come from Tarsus," said the Hixabrod. "I was there as a member of the Galactic Survey Team, mapping the planet. It was my duty to certify to the truth of the map."

The choice was no choice. Clay stood staring at the Hixabrod as the room waited for his answer. Rage burning within me, I looked down the table for a sign in the faces of the others that this thing might be stopped. But where I expected to see sympathy, there was nothing. Instead, there was blankness, or cynicism, or even the wet-lipped interest of men who like their excitement written in blood or tears.

And I realized with a sudden sinking of hopes that I stood alone, after all, as Clay's friend. In my own approaching age and garrulity I had not minded his talk of Lulungomeena, hour on repetitive hour. But these others had grown weary of it. Where I saw tragedy, they saw only retribution coming to a lying bore.

And what Clay saw was what I saw. His eyes went dark and cold.

"How much will you bet?" he asked.

"All I've got," responded the Kid, leaning forward eagerly. "Enough and more than enough to match that bankroll of yours. The equivalent of eight years' pay."

Stiffly, without a word, Clay produced his savings book and a voucher pad. He wrote out a voucher for the whole amount and laid book and voucher on the table before Dor Lassos. The Kid, who had obviously come prepared, did the same, adding a thick pile of cash from his gambling of recent weeks.

"That's all of it?" asked Clay.

"All of it," said the Kid.

Clay nodded and stepped back.

"Go ahead," he said.

The Kid turned toward the alien.

"Dor Lassos," he said. "We appreciate your cooperation in this matter."

"I am glad to hear it," responded the Hixabrod, "since my cooperation will cost the winner of the bet a thousand credits."

The abrupt injection of this commercial note threw the Kid momentarily off stride. I, alone in the room, who knew the Hixabrod people, had expected it. But the rest had not, and it struck a sour note, which reflected back on the Kid. Up until now, the bet had seemed to most of the others like a cruel but at least honest game, concerning ourselves only. Suddenly it had become a little like hiring a paid bully to beat up a stationmate.

But it was too late now to stop; the bet had been made. Nevertheless, there were murmurs from different parts of the room.

The Kid hurried on, fearful of an interruption. Clay's savings were on his mind.

"You were a member of the mapping survey team?" he asked Dor Lassos.

"I was," said the Hixabrod.

"Then you know the planet?"

"I do."

"You know its geography?" insisted the Kid.

"I do not repeat myself." The eyes of the Hixabrod were chill and withdrawn, almost a little baleful, as they met those of the Kid.

"What kind of a planet is it?" The Kid licked his lips. He was beginning to recover his usual self-assurance. "Is it a large planet?"

"No."

"Is Tarsus a rich planet?"

"No."

"Is it a pretty planet?"

"I did not find it so."

"Get to the point!" snapped Clay with strained harshness.

The Kid glanced at him, savoring this moment. He turned back to the Hixabrod.

"Very well, Dor Lassos," he said, "we got to the meat of the matter. Have you ever heard of Lulungomeena?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever been to Lulungomeena?"

"I have."

"And do you truthfully — " for the first time, a fierce and burning anger flashed momentarily in the eyes of the Hixabrod; the insult the Kid had just unthinkingly given Dor Lassos was a deadly one — "*truthfully* say that in your considered opinion Lulungomeena is the most wonderful place in the Universe?"

Dor Lassos turned his gaze away from him and let it wander over the rest of the room. Now, at last, his contempt for all there was plain to be read on his face.

"Yes, it is," said Dor Lassos.

He rose to his feet at the head of the stunned group around the table. From the pile of cash he extracted a thousand credits, then passed the remainder, along with the two account books and the vouchers, to Clay. Then he took one step toward the Kid.

He halted before him and offered his hands to the man — palms up, the tips of his fingers a scant couple of inches short of the Kid's face.

"My hands are clean," he said.

His fingers arced; and, suddenly, as we watched, stubby, gleaming claws shot smoothly from those fingertips to tremble lightly against the skin of the Kid's face.

"Do you doubt the truthfulness of a Hixabrod?" his robot voice asked.

The Kid's face was white and his cheeks hollowed in fear. The needle points of the claws were very close to his eyes. He swallowed once.

"No — " he whispered.

The claws retracted. The hands returned to their

owner's sides. Once more completely withdrawn and impersonal, Dor Lassos turned and bowed to us all.

"My appreciation of your courtesy," he said, the metallic tones of his voice loud in the silence.

Then he turned and, marching like a metronome, disappeared through the doorway of the recreation room and off in the direction of his quarters.

"And so we part," said Clay Harbank as we shook hands. "I hope you find the Dorsai Planets as welcome as I intend to find Lulungomeena."

I grumbled a little. "That was plain damn foolishness. You didn't have to buy me out as well."

"There were more than enough credits for the both of us," said Clay.

It was a month after the bet and the two of us were standing in the Deneb One spaceport. For miles in every direction, the great echoing building of this central terminal stretched around us. In ten minutes I was due to board my ship for the Dorsai Planets. Clay himself still had several days to wait before one of the infrequent ships to Tarsus would be ready to leave.

"The bet itself was damn foolishness," I went on, determined to find something to complain about. We Dorsai do not enjoy these moments of emotion. But a Dorsai is a Dorsai. I am not apologizing.

"No foolishness," said Clay. For a moment a shadow crossed his face. "You forget that a real gambler bets only on a sure thing. When I looked into the Hixabrod's eyes, I was sure."

"How can you say 'a sure thing'?"

"The Hixabrod loved his home," Clay said.

I stared at him, astounded. "But you weren't betting on Hixa. Of course he would prefer Hixa to any other place in the Universe. But you were betting on Tarsus — on Lulungomeena — remember?"

The shadow was back for a moment on Clay's face. "The bet was certain. I feel a little guilty about the Kid, but I warned him that gambling money never stuck. Besides, he's young and I'm getting old. I couldn't afford to lose."

"Will you come down out of the clouds," I demanded, "and explain this thing? Why was the bet certain? What was the trick, if there was one?"

"The trick?" repeated Clay. He smiled at me. "The trick was that the Hixabrod could not be otherwise than truthful. It was all in the name of my birthplace — Lulungomeena."


He looked at my puzzled face and put a hand on my shoulder.

"You see, Mort," he said quietly, "it was the name that fooled everybody. Lulungomeena stands for something in my language. But not for any city or town or village. Everybody on Tarsus has his own Lulungomeena. Everybody in the Universe has."

"How do you figure that, Clay?"

"It's a word," he explained. "A word in the Tarsusian language. It means 'home.'"

—GORDON R. DICKSON



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didn't prepare
me for...

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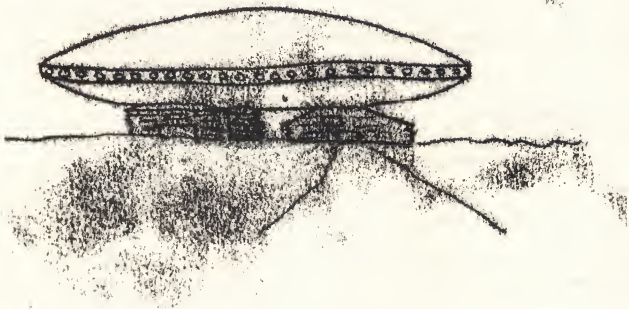
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THE CLIENT FROM HELL

By RICHARD CURTIS

On the day it was reported that a spaceship had touched down in New Guinea, I was scheduled to have lunch with one of my oldest friends in the publishing business, Bob Gorenstein of Random House. The news had come over the radio and because of the remoteness of the location, the only eyewitness account had been phoned in by the Masfields, the family whose plantation had been flattened by the 600 ton mass of the Drunians' "travel disk." I doubt if anyone on our planet within earshot of a radio or television talked about anything else that morning, and in fact by noon the first of an endless crop of alien jokes was already bouncing over the phone lines between Hollywood and New York. And so when Bob called me that morning to set up our lunch, he was ready with his quip.

"I'm surprised to find you in," he said. "I thought you'd already be on a plane to New Guinea to sign these guys."

"I hate representing celebrities," I said. "Even celebrities from outer space."

"What do you have against celebrities?"

"They're impossibly demanding."

"That's certainly true," said Gorenstein. "But I can't believe you'd turn down an opportunity to be the literary agent for the first alien visitors in the history of the

world."

"I'm sure they're as big a pain in the ass as any other stars, plus they probably smell bad."

Bob booked lunch at 1 p.m. at An American Place on East 32nd Street, where we continued our banter over drinks. Shortage of time prohibits me from detailing these exchanges, which are irrelevant anyway. Suffice it to say that publishing people are among the wittiest of any profession, and there was much hilarity as we invented scenarios for such things as alien author tours, publishing parties, and talk show interviews.

As Gorenstein donned his reading glasses to review the menu, he flashed a provocative smile. "Buddy Alter is already on his way to Papua."

I shook my head. "Why am I not surprised to hear this?" Buddy Alter stood at the purple end of the spectrum of literary agents, a true parasite who batted on the very worst that human nature had to offer. The moment a news story broke about some lurid murder, sex scandal, or tragedy, Buddy booked a plane to persuade the principals to let him handle their book, movie, and allied merchandise rights. And he didn't particularly care whether he represented perpetrator or victim. Buddy was the literary agent equivalent of an ambulance chaser.

A twinkle in Gorenstein's eyes told me there was something more. An instant later I guessed what it was. "And I suppose Random House has agreed to buy the book from Buddy if he comes back with their exclusive story."

Gorenstein smiled, not very cryptically. "The salmon special sounds very good."

"God almighty, Bob," I said, pounding the table. The china and silver jangled and the hubbub around us died

for a moment as heads turned to the source of the disruption. "Have you no shame?" I murmured after the noise level rose again.

Gorenstein chuckled. "We've only bought a right of first refusal," he said, summoning our waiter.

Thus began what might be called The Great Alien Sweepstakes, for as it turned out Buddy Alter was but one of a veritable tsunami of media representatives that swept across the Pacific Ocean that week hoping not merely to witness humanity's first confirmed encounter with members of a non-human race, but to tie up the exclusive rights to their story. The New Guinea government attempted to cordon off the site until it was established that the "alien blokes" were neither hostile nor contagious. But even the best armed military contingent is no match for a determined and resourceful television crew or an aggressive team of newspaper reporters. Certainly the army was no match for the likes of Buddy Alter and his vision of fabulous commissions. It is said he had actually brought his checkbook with him! In what currency? I wondered.

I watched this circus on television and could only shake my head, as I had all during that lunch with Bob Gorenstein while I listened to him justifying his company's decision to get involved in the bidding war.

I suppose my reluctance to jump into this feeding frenzy will puzzle the reader, just as it did my colleagues in the publishing industry. It's a sign of the times that nobody even tried to understand how appalling I found it that people would cast their dignity to the winds to cash in on this event. Realizing that anything I said would sound like sour grapes, I said very little at all, but not a few colleagues thought that my attitude was insufferably smug.

Even my wife suggested I was foolish not to make at least some effort to offer the visitors representation. "Wouldn't they be better off in your hands than in Buddy Alter's? My God, he'll have them endorsing Miller Lite Beer!"

We had just clicked off the evening television news with the latest report on the carnival in New Guinea. Two executives from the Disney Company had offered to transport the space ship to a site in Texas and create a 10,000 acre theme park around it.

"Not you, too," I moaned.

My wife gazed crossly at me. "Sometimes you wave your dignity around like some crusader's sword. Would it be so terrible for you to make an effort to contact them? Or have you suddenly become allergic to big commissions?"

This last remark stung me. "I thought you understood how I feel."

"Why don't you run it past me once again to make sure."

"The whole thing is . . . well, so undignified."

She peered at me. "The agent for the Butcher of Harlem is suddenly donning the mantle of dignity?"

"I didn't solicit him," I replied feebly.

She scowled. "I see. It's dignified to represent a man who slaughtered and cannibalized fifteen geriatric females because *he* solicited *you*. But it's *infra dignitate* to solicit a voyager from another star."

"I feel like a prostitute when I chase others."

"Your nobility is inspiring," she snorted, snapping a newspaper open and terminating the conversation.

I lapsed into a funk. Gazing at the ceiling with its spiderweb tracery of hairline cracks, I brooded on the unfairness of a world that handsomely rewarded prostitutes like Buddy Alter with penthouse apartments, second homes in the Hamptons, and Rolls Royce automobiles, but rewarded virtuous fellows like me with cramped apartments, seven year old Fords, and wives who had not enjoyed a genuine vacation in eight years.

Ultimately I stood stoutly on my moral superiority and opted for the role of spectator. My wife, God bless her, never said another word about the matter. She didn't have to. Her feelings were painfully implicit in her sighs and baleful looks every time the news carried another story of the bidding wars for the Drunians' exclusive story, product endorsement, or participation in one commercial scheme or another.

After two or three months, however, it began to be apparent that no one had succeeded in signing the spacefarers. Newspaper accounts and media industry gossip indicated that the Drunians were being extremely wary. Whether out of confusion or distrust it was not yet clear. Whatever motivated them, they definitely were not biting at offers that would have made even a Michael Jackson envious. Their caution should not have come as such a surprise. Anyone sophisticated enough to develop a means of interstellar propulsion must presumably be shrewd enough to know when he is being hustled. As my Random House friend observed, "Hell, their race is twenty million years old, so we know they weren't born yesterday." He was one of innumerable shell-shocked veterans of the bidding wars returning to corporate headquarters with nothing to show for months in the field but a lot of bills for airfare, hotel accommodations, bar tabs, and diarrhea medicine.

What we now realize is they were simply studying us. They had been attracted to our world by the radio signals broadcast by our Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence program, and for the first few weeks after their landing they established communications with our computers. Quickly reassuring us that their intentions were not hostile, they began requesting digitized information about all earthly things. We were thrilled to oblige, and they consumed data at a prodigious rate. They easily learned several dozen human languages, and began communicating with reporters in their native tongues by means of linguistic conversion devices. Presently they ventured out of the bays of their craft, their elephantine forms gliding with majestic dignity on furry pods, and, to the universal joy of the entire human race, the Intergalactic Epoch was born in that New Guinea field. All this is on film.

What is not on film is the expression on my face when the phone rang about a month later and a low-pitched metallic voice announced, "Mr. Gordon? This is Garto of Drune." The sound was obviously rendered by some sort of speech simulator, but I suspected something else. "Okay Eddie, stop screwing around. What do you want?"

"Who's that, dear?" My wife called from the kitchen.

"My brother, up to his usual unfunny pranks. He's talking into a cooking pot and expects me to believe it's the guy from outer space. Eddie, we're just sitting down to din . . ."

"This is Garto, Mr. Gordon. No joke."

"Tell him you'll call him back," my wife shouted. "The chicken will get cold."

"I'll get back to you, okay, Garto? Is there a number on the space ship where I can reach you?"

"Now it's you who are joking," the voice said.

"Listen, chum, if you're Garto, send me a sign."

I had no sooner uttered the words than a shriek came from the kitchen and a horrible clatter of a metal tray crashing to the floor. I dropped the phone and rushed to the kitchen. On the floor was a live chicken flapping and squawking. Standing on the counter was my wife, also flapping and squawking.

Trembling, I picked up the extension in the kitchen. "Okay, Mister, you have my attention."

"I am Garto."

"I'll accept that as a working thesis."

"I wish to tell the story of my people, of our world, of my voyage."

"Could you talk a little louder? There's a woman screaming in here."

He repeated the message. "Now you definitely have my attention," I said. I put my finger over my lips and my wife, sensing that something extraordinary was happening, fell silent. "And how may I be of help to you?"

"I will need someone to represent me. You are universally admired, and from all we have been able to learn, you are an honest man. We have encountered very few here."

My wife implored me with her eyes to explain what was going on. I cupped my hand over the phone. "It's the guy from outer space. He wants me to be his agent."

"Sure," she said.

"If you need proof, I'll ask him to turn you into a chicken, too."

"No, thank you."

"What do I have to do?" I asked into the phone.

"Cancel your appointments and book a flight to New Guinea. I will contact you tomorrow to arrange details of our meeting."

"I will do so. But you owe me a chicken dinner for two."

As I hung up, the doorman buzzed us. My wife picked up the intercom. Her eyes widened.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Maxie's Barbecue is on the way up," she said. "With chicken dinner for two."

And that is how I came to be the literary agent and personal manager of Garto and his contingent of Drunians. I will not go into the details of my trip to New Guinea and my personal experiences in getting to know the explorers from that distant world. Nor will I amplify on the way I created a business strategy for them, conducted their negotiations, and exploited their stories in every possible medium. It's fascinating, but not pertinent to this account. And besides, I've chronicled it in my memoir, "Agent to the Starfarers." I cannot, however, resist the temptation to state that my clients made me a rich man, my agent colleagues became practically apoplectic with envy, and my wife treated me with a renewed respect bordering on reverence. I tried not to be insufferably smug with her, and succeeded most of the time.

When did it all go wrong, then? Well, when in the long sad chronicle of human history have things always gone wrong? When people get greedy, that's when. You would think that the countless publishers, movie studios, cable and television networks, media producers, product developers, commercial sponsors, and lawyers would have been content with the fortunes they made on the licenses I negotiated with them. But no, they couldn't let it go at that.

The big trouble began when Garto summoned me to Texas (where Disney had indeed established a theme park around the Drunian spacecraft). We hadn't talked face to face for six months; our frequent but routine conversations were usually conducted by telephone or televideo. Obviously the matter he had to take up with me was far from routine: I could tell from the agitated timbre of his voice, even though communicated through his translation device. I caught the next plane to Houston.

I felt like a movie star on opening night as a guard ushered me up the spacecraft's ramp before the stares of thousands of fairground visitors. I found Garto in his chamber, the room replete of his sweet-sour aroma to which I had never quite become accustomed. On the table before him were stacks of documents which I immediately recognized as book and movie contracts, as well as royalty statements issued by publishers, movie companies, and the countless merchandise firms that had licensed the rights to Drunian toys, games, clothes, furniture, tapes and records, and every other exploitable form of Druniana that the resourceful minds of business people can conjure.

"You have reviewed these?" he said without salutation.

"Of course."

"You know then that they are phony."

I sat up sharply and paused to choose my reply carefully. "My accountants routinely audit them and have found no major discrepancies, Garto."

"They represent a fraction of what these works have actually earned. Where is the rest of our money?"

I picked a bunch of the papers up and examined them, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

"Perhaps you have misunderstood or misinterpreted the figures?"

He extended a pod and tapped a publisher's royalty statement. "Half of the money due on sales of this book are not reported."

I uttered a sigh of relief as I immediately saw what was troubling him. "I had told you at the outset that publishers sell books on consignment. They always hold back royalties to authors in case copies are returned."

"There are few returns of my books," Garto declared. I accepted this statement at face value. I had never doubted that Garto had ways of obtaining confidential information that was inaccessible to literary agents and other mere mortals.

"Perhaps your publishers have been overly zealous in withholding some of your money," I said. "Is something else bothering you?"

"They promised me an embossed foil cover. And my author's photo is blurry. But that is of no consequence compared to the missing royalties."

"No, I don't suppose it is. What else?"

He pushed another pile of papers at me. "Where are the rest of my movie profits?" he demanded.

"I told you about that, too, Garto, when you originally asked me to represent you."

"Remind me."

"Movie profits are calculated on a net basis, after deduction of certain defined expenses. The theatre owners take a piece of every ticket sold at the box office, the distributor takes a bite, the movie studio writes off all sorts of deductible items and overhead . . ."

Garto cut me off with a majestic wave of his pod. "They are all lining their pockets every step of the way."

"That's show biz," I quipped, hoping to lighten the atmosphere a bit, for the air was crackling with danger.

"Seriously, Garto, movie studio accountants are among the most creative members of the human race. They have siphoned money from profit participants from the very beginning of the industry."

"That is neither an acceptable explanation nor a satisfactory excuse. I understand capitalism perfectly well and respect the desires of business firms to earn reasonable profits on their investment. The profits being earned by publishers, movie companies, and other licensees are flagrantly unreasonable, however. I want what is coming to me and my crewmates. And, by the way, they reneged on their promise of a full screen credit as technical consultant, and they never reimbursed my per diem expenses on location in Georgia."

"Rectifying that will be easier than making a studio cough up profits," I said. "You're looking at a long and honorable tradition of institutionalized fraud."

"If you cannot accomplish this, I will have to wonder whether, perhaps, even you are benefiting from these

diversions of my funds."

"My friend, I am appalled that you should even think such a thing."

"I want what is coming to me," he repeated.

"I will do what I can, Garto."

"You'll do more than that," he said. "And you'll do it within one week from this hour."

The latter was stated in a deadly flat tone that I had never heard in his voice before, but it chilled me to the marrow of my bones. So staggered was I by this ominous warning that it did not occur to me to ask what remedy he contemplated if I failed to carry out my mandate of redressing his grievance. For this oversight it appears that the human race is about to pay dearly.

You will not be surprised to learn that I have spent the six and a half days and nights since that moment exerting the most determined effort in the history of the literary agents' profession to persuade publishers, movie executives, and merchandise manufacturers to refund the profits that Garto considered to be excessive. Most of you reading this narrative have the good fortune never to have encountered the mentality of accountants in the publishing and entertainment field, so you will simply have to take my word for it that my blandishments were greeted with derision to say the least. More common were the cynical jokes, at which I would have laughed had not the matter been as grave and urgent as it was. Indeed, in the good old, pre-Garto days, I had laughed at such jokes, and made up a few myself.

But I could not impress any of Garto's accounts payable that this was not merely a case of some naive author bitching that the system was gypping him. My week of imploring, cajoling, and threatening yielded not a dime of reparations. One movie president summed up the prevailing attitude when he sneered, "Screw him! If he doesn't like the way we do business, he can zap us with his little ray gun."

Which brings us to what I believe to be the last moment of the human race. I calculate that we have about a half hour. The Drunian craft hovers in the stratosphere, its "little ray gun" (or whatever weapon it employs) trained on our planet and its frail populace of fools and knaves. When it became clear, about an hour ago, that Garto had not been bluffing, I was inundated by panicky phone calls from many of Garto's debtors pressing settlements upon me. Their offers were in vain. Garto had stopped taking my phone calls.

As the clock moves inexorably toward doomsday, I am consumed by a single thought: could Buddy Alter have structured Garto's deals any better than I did?

—RICHARD CURTIS

Galaxy

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JUST RUBBERFACE AND ME

By E. JAY O'CONNELL

Illustrated by S. Gold

A fine spray of freezing rain stung my face as I turned up Boylston, walking towards the library. An image formed in my mind, of a little girl with a tuft of blonde hair slicked across her left eye. So still. Too still. I shivered and picked up the pace. *Please don't let it happen now.*

The heat rising up through the grate couldn't compete with the driving cold, but at the moment, I didn't care. I shook a vial of fugue from the piploc and popped it into the shunt in my left forearm, watching as my blood mixed slowly with the amber drug. Satisfied it was working properly, I zipped the fleshy seal closed and pushed myself against the wall, trying to get out of the worst of the rain.

I'd spent the day down at the reclamation center, picking stuff from the waste stream and tossing it down the appropriate holes.

Across the grate from me, a couple of worn out drunks in gray government issue were sharing a bottle, oblivious to the cold. What a stupid drug. I hate drunks.

I sighed, long and low, as the fugue hit my heart with a raw punch of pleasure. The continuous feed implant

said a lot about me. As much as I needed to know, anyway. They were expensive, so I'd come from money. I was broke now, so something bad had happened, and I didn't want to remember it.

And I wouldn't, at least for a while.

The sleet finally decided to turn to rain, and the wind whipped it around the library overhang like it wasn't there, soaking me to the skin. I closed my eyes. Who was I, again? I didn't remember.

Life was good.

Blackness, dark and sweet, surrounded me. I slept in the quiet warmth, floating in smooth wet emptiness. A sharp pain intruded, sending crackling waves of ugly red light through the black. My eyelids fluttered open, and I saw a green plastic boot jammed into my stomach.

"Go 'way."

The person attached to the boot hunkered down next to me. Plastic lensed eyes peered out of a face that might have been handsome had it been real. A rubberface.

"Get up." His voice was a metallic buzz. "You're dying."

"Maybe I want to die."

"No you don't."

I couldn't think of a retort for that, because it was true. Instead, I extended a numb white hand toward the figure crouched in the rain, who hauled me erect with ease. I didn't weigh much anymore.

I took one teetering step forward and fell flat on my face.

I woke up warm and dry in bed, wrapped in a scratchy wool blanket. My fingertips and toes tingled violently, making me think sickly of frostbite and gangrene.

The basement room was small and clean, illuminated by a single bare bulb and the weak light sifting through the cobwebbed halfwindow near the ceiling. A battered laundry sink and a wooden cable spool table with two plastic lawnchairs were the only furniture other than the bed. All four walls were covered with plank shelves supported by cinderblocks, piled high with old, static books.

Rubberface stood at the table stirring a pot of something on a hot plate. He turned and smiled. God, they gave me the creeps. From a distance, the prosthesis passed for a face, but close up, you could tell it was fake. The mask worked like an artificial limb. These burned out, burned up vets were a pretty common sight on the streets.

I checked my fingers and toes for frostbites to avoid having to look at him. I'd been stripped to my shorts, and probably bathed as well.

"Your feet are fine," he buzzed. His larynx must have been destroyed in the war, because his voice was one of those cheap synth units, with only the barest hint of inflection. "Pink and healthy. You're lucky."

I squeezed a toe, blood reddening the grayish skin. It

hurt like hell, but that was probably good. "Yeah. Lucky is my goddamn middle name."

"Very lucky." He poured the contents of the saucerpan into a chipped blue mug, added a spoon, and passed it to me. The smell triggered a ravenous hunger.

The stuff was good, vegetable stew in a brown gravy, thick with potatoes and carrots, flavored with a lot of garlic. I polished it off quickly, scalding the roof of my mouth in the process. "More?"

Rubberface shook his head, grinning. "No. Sorry. I don't want to clean your puke off the floor. Maybe in the morning."

That irritated me, though he was probably right. "Why did you pick me up?" I was worried that he was going to try to whip some religion on me, something I couldn't stand. Other less savory thoughts came to mind, but I pushed them away.

He nodded as if he understood. "I need your help."

"What?" I laughed weakly, and closed my eyes, my tongue investigating my scalded upper palate, gently probing the graininess there. "I'm a fuguer for Christ's sake."

"I know what you are. I'm conducting a study."

The stew warmed my stomach, spilling lassitude into my blood. I couldn't keep my eyes open, but I managed another snicker. "Nice lab you got here" I didn't know his name. "What's your name?"

"What does it matter?" He paused, his face in neutral, and asked, "What do you call yourself?"

"I make it my business not to remember."

That laugh again. "Then just call me Rubberface. You babbled some in your sleep. I think your name is Joe."

The name meant nothing to me. "Good," I said, and meant it. "Good to have something to call each other."

He may have said something else, but I was fast asleep.

I remember watching a big spider build a web in the rafters near the window, taking it in with all the patience of a time-lapse camera. Rubberface sat down on the cot beside me, and watched awhile, too.

One gray morning, I felt like moving. Rubberface was gone again.

I climbed out of the cot and put on the government issue baggies piled at the foot of the bed, wincing at the coarseness of the fabric. It took several minutes of stretching to work the kinks from my cramped body. My name was still lost to me, which was good. Very good.

I searched the place methodically, checking every book, riffling the pages, coughing at the mustiness wafting from the yellowed leaves. Nothing. No fugue. No money to buy more. On a whim, I shoved the spool table against the wall, discovering a metal panel cut into the concrete. Bingo.

I just barely had the strength to lift the heavy panel, by its rusty iron ring. Inside the cubby was a burlap sack,

fairly heavy, filled with angular forms that clicked as I hauled it up and spilled it onto the cold cement.

A dozen paperweight sized cubes of clear plastic skittered across the floor. I picked one up, a mild electric feeling shivering up my fingers as I turned it over in the weak light, peering into it.

A tiny face peered back at me, a toothless old man, his features twisting in disgust and horror. It was the best hologram I'd ever seen; no rainbow glints, or digital rubbery smoothness.

As I held it, a sick feeling welled up in my stomach. The face. I recognized the face. A scratchy voice echoed weakly in my head. "I didn't mean to hit her so hard. I loved her" The cube slipped from my hand, clattering to the cement.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and then repacked the bag quickly, trying not to look too closely at the things. Every slowly writhing face wore the same horrified expression. An old black woman gaped from a cube under the table, her mouth a howling pink oval. I grabbed it and stuffed it in the sack, again feeling that little shock, and hearing a voice, this time an inarticulate keening.

Shaking, I returned the room to its original state. I hadn't the slightest idea what the damn things were. I didn't want to know.

I lay back in bed, the funk returning like the tide. I'd recognized the old man in the first cube from the library, a fellow fuguer. He'd shared a vial with me once.

And as much as it made no sense, I couldn't get the thought out of my mind, that he was alive in there, and in pain. And that I should do something, to try to help.

I spent the next day flipping through the static books. An ingrained habit that the fugue hadn't touched caused me to brush at the lower right-hand corner of the page, and wait for the display to refresh. I kept tapping terms for footnotes and annotations, but after a while I remembered to turn the pages. The collection was random, probably garbage-picked. Old college psych texts rubbed elbows with romance novels, UFO books, and yesterday's popular trash.

The old man's face from the cube lingered nastily in my mind. I remembered suddenly that he'd shown me how to pick through the dumpsters using a stick instead of my hands, and he'd let me help him with some of the more profitable bins, near the university

The sudden burst of memory was alarming. I didn't have much longer before it all came back. Rubberface pushed in after dark as I was leafing through an old news magazine. When he saw me sitting up on the bed, he raised his eyebrows.

"Dressed, I see."

"Yeah. Thanks. Thanks a lot." I shuffled towards the door, gesturing helplessly. "But I gotta go."

He didn't move. "I need your help."

"Look, I didn't ask for *your* help, okay? So please don't ask for mine. I have to go." I stood there, clenching

and unclenching my fists, wondering if he had any money, wondering if I could get it from him. I remembered that he'd carried me here; he *looked* strong.

"Where are you going?"

"You know where I'm going."

He shook his head. "You don't have any money."

"I'll get some."

He produced a wad of well-worn two dollar chips from a pouch in his belt, and laid it on the table between us. Rubberface made great beggars. "I'll give you the money, if you want it. After you listen to what I have to say."

I considered making a grab for it and running, but decided against it.

"You're almost finished."

I sighed. I'd heard *that* before.

"You know how this stuff works on trauma cases?"

He rapped the table with a mottled knuckle. "Pay attention, boy. Every time you remember, the pain gets more intense. Fugue erodes ego. Every time the memory returns, there's less of you there to deal with it, so you need it worse. Vicious cycle. It ends in one of three ways."

He held up a finger. "Suicide. You won't be able to wait another minute for the dose, and you'll snuff yourself out in the most direct means available."

He raised another finger "Statue. You know what a statue feels? Friend of mind — psych nurse — told me. They'd shocked a few awake, for awhile. A statue's mind, caught in the repressed memory, is overwhelmed and starts to loop. The memory plays forever. Your nightmare — what you're running from — spinning forever like a stuck record in your brain. I can't think of a better description of hell, can you?"

Rubberface waited, the cash in front of him, his latex features as impassive as a Halloween mask. I didn't stop to think why I believed him. I just did. "What's the other option? You said there were three."

"Integration. You let the memories come back. Try and live with them. I can help you do it. You have to trust me."

The hunger was building, and I knew in a matter of minutes or hours I'd have no choice. I'd take the money. And end up, what — like the old man in the cube?

The rainbow eagle hologram on the top bill shimmered with a fierce intensity, the colors biting brightly, the beginning of an aura. My memory was coming back. It always did, and always would. What was the point in running, if it was going to catch me in the end?

I steadied myself. "I'll try it," I croaked. "How . . ."

Rubberface pulled something from a box on one of the shelves, strips of cloth and rubber, reinforced with smooth steel rivets. "Restraints."

"Do I need those?"

"Yes. You need them." He fit my hands into the molded rubber grips, and tightened straps across the knuckles.

"Once had a man break free and tear his eyes out. Don't worry, these will hold."

My stomach slowly writhed, as the aura intensified. I gulped down a mouthful of saliva. "What do I do now?"

"Talk."

My name was Joseph Peters Dunn. "About what?"

"What you remember."

Terror welled up in me, prickling the hairs on the back of my neck. This was a terrible mistake. The girl's face floated in my mind, blonde hair, slack lips, glazed eyes. So still.

"I don't want to do this anymore."

Rubberface shook his head. "Sorry. You made the decision. Now you have to live with it. You'll have to live with all of your decisions soon."

"No." There was a roaring in my ears, an SST overhead, coming down over Logan. But the sound just got louder, and louder, and louder, until I was sure that the thing would crash through the ceiling. The white noise filled my ears, my head, a directionless roar blotting out everything. The room faded, blacking in from the edges like a pupil irising closed.

Something within me cringed as I touched the doorknob.

"Honey, I'm home!" A little joke. Very little.

"It's all right." I heard a voice somewhere say. "You lived through this once." I opened the door.

Linda's voice came from the kitchen.

"Oh, is it *that* late . . . ?"

Dolly through the freshly vacuumed living and dining room to the kitchen. Expensive furniture, modern, deco, sterile, an ebony table surrounded by tall, skeletal chairs designed by the Marquis de Sade.

She was at the sink, scrubbing something, the circles under her eyes even darker than the day before. She was wearing an old pair of my jeans rolled up at the ankles, and one of my ancient Yale T-shirts.

The Bible was open on the kitchen table. It was the Old Testament, again, with the *same damn passage* glowing in yellow highlighter.

"We're meeting Bill and Kathy at the club for dinner tonight, don't you remember?" Her slack expression told him she didn't. Her memory had been worthless since the new medication.

She nodded listlessly. "All right. I'll get ready." She emptied a plastic bucket of water into the sink. The foamy liquid swirled and gurgled down the drain. It was pink. But the bottle of detergent next to the bucket was yellow.

Someone, somewhere, said no.

Rubberface wiped my forehead with a cold rag.

"Let me go."

"You'll follow the thread back, back to the beginning. Then you integrate."

I felt like I was going to vomit. "Don't want to."

"How do you know you don't want to?"

"It's a feeling, can't describe it. Like the telephone ringing — you know it's bad news even before you pick it up. Like that."

The room began blacking out again. I started to cry.

I loosened my tie and kissed Linda's forehead. "Come up and take a shower with me?" I wagged my eyebrows as she frowned, and went back to the scrubbing. We didn't *do* that anymore. As I got undressed in the bathroom I noticed a spot of fuzzy blueness in the bottom of the toilet. Something clicked.

It was Linda's new medication.

"Honey, where's the kid?" I shouted. "I'll go pick up the sitter while you get ready."

"I think she's sleeping."

I showered and shaved, put on a crushed red velvet bathrobe Linda had given me for Christmas.

Elisa's TV was tuned to a sitcom, intermittent waves of canned laughter rolling through the room. She was in bed, the covers pulled up to her neck. I turned off the set, the screen quickly shrinking to a pinpoint of phosphorescence that glared at me accusingly.

I sat on the edge of the bed. The room was utterly quiet. Linda was motionless under the quilted bedspread, mouth slightly askew, a tuft of blonde hair stuck to her left eye. It looked uncomfortable.

"Elisa, honey, wake up." There was the roar of a jet flying overhead, loud, which was funny, because we weren't in any approach path. I leaned over to brush the hair from her eye, and felt the warm wetness slick my other palm where I was supporting myself.

And a bloody handprint bled through the fabric.

And my head exploded in a sparkling burst of hot white light.

Rubberface stood over me, mechanically slapping me in the face. His hand struck my head, rocking it to the right, causing another flare of brilliance. He raised his hand to deliver another blow, and paused looking in my eyes.

"Awake?"

I nodded vigorously. "Yes! Now, get the hell off me, you goddamn mannequin! You're going to let me loose and give me that goddamn money —"

"Shut up. That was *it*, last time. You were turning to stone. Another dose, you *don't forget*, you remember! Everything and for always!"

My throat ached so badly I could hardly swallow. The memory was making me physically ill. I'd integrated all right. It was all there. Elisa wasn't the only dead one. Getting Linda back on the medication had only let her know the enormity of her crime. I remembered holding her, sobbing, for hours, as she babbled about God. She had waited patiently for God to tell her to put down the knife, as he had with Abraham.

Only he hadn't.

I remembered Linda's suicide, the blood in the sink, everything, every little thing.

"It wasn't your fault." Rubberface's eyes burned into me. They had a hypnotic quality. Not quite human.

"It was! I knew she wasn't taking the pills. And I'd seen the Bible, open to that passage for days."

"You couldn't have known. She was insane."

"She'd *always* been insane! I knew that when I married her!" The tears were rolling down my face freely. "It was my job to make sure something like this didn't happen."

I began to jerk at my bonds savagely, bruising my wrists and ankles against the restraints. "Let me go."

He nodded, reached out and touched my forehead. The pain stopped then, as if cut off by a switch. The memories were still there, but they didn't matter, somehow.

"What the hell did you do to me?"

"Temporary anesthesia. It'll wear off." He began unbuckling the restraints. When he had freed both my hands, and was bending down to release my legs, I swung at him mindlessly. My fist hooked the edge of the mask, and sent it flying across the room.

He looked back at me, his face a twisted mass of purple keloid, his lower jaw partly gone, glistening patches of cauterized bone peeking through the runneled flesh. Black, bloody wires, the nerve hookups, protruded from his cheeks and forehead in clumps.

But even hiding behind plastic lenses, it was obvious that the thing living in that ruined body wasn't exactly human. He scrambled briefly for the mask, picked it up, holding it for several seconds before sighing and tossing it on the table.

He stared at me, and again, I was overwhelmed by the sense of his *otherness*. "People never look too closely at the mask," he said softly, his synthetic voice suddenly more modulated, more human. "That's why I wear it. Did you know your people have senses of which they're not aware?"

I was shivering non-stop now. I hugged myself tightly, and tried to stop. "What are you?"

"Policeman? Social worker? Trade liaison? You don't have the language for what I am."

I'm not sure *how* I knew. Maybe he was a little bit inside my mind, helping me to understand. "You're not from Earth?"

"No." Somehow, through all the scars, he managed a smile. It was mainly around the eyes. "Not from Earth."

"What's the deal with the cubes?"

"They're sleepwalkers, turned to stone. Processed locally into a . . . well, I guess you'd call it an entertainment product."

"What?"

"There is a species — I must confess, I can't stand them. They're mental vampires. Pain junkies. Parasites. They became the dominant lifeform on a planet with three sapient races, by manipulating them from within, using pleasure and pain. They like pain the best. Emotional pain more than physical. Your species has a great capacity for pain . . ." He trailed off.

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

He rubbed the side of his head. "The cubes are candy for a very unpleasant people. There has been a trade. Several of your governments and major corporations are involved."

"What are you doing with me?"

"You're evidence, Joe."

My hand strayed to the tiny bump on the back of my head. I pressed on it, but it didn't hurt. It had never hurt.

He nodded slowly. "A recording."

I worked my fingernails through the thin layer of skin, my thumbnail sliding under a round flat disk inside the bump. The tab resisted, and then, sickeningly, gave. As I drew it out, the room fell away as if I had plummeted off a building.

I found myself sitting on a bed in a strange book-lined room, staring at a rubberface. I hate rubberfaces. A strand of crystal glittered between my thumb and forefinger, lit from within by slowly dancing flecks of golden radiance. What the hell was this?

The rubberface took the glowing crystal from my outstretched hand. There was mild pressure at the base of my skull and the memory of the last couple of days slid into place.

"Jesus!"

"There is no crime without context," he said, turning to run a finger across a row of book spines. "I should never have read these. That was the big mistake. Losing the proper detachment." He sighed loudly. "I can't do it."

"Do what?"

"Treat you as an animal. You are almost-human." I felt those eyes again, bearing down on me mercilessly. "Joe, I can see a little into the future. Not very far, but far enough. Once I leave here with that core — your memory of these last few days — you don't live. I'm almost certain."

I considered that. "If I give you the core, will the trade stop?"

Rubberface nodded slowly. "Perhaps."

"Don't you have other cores? You said you've done this before."

"Nothing like yours," he said, staring into my eyes. "Without it . . ."

"I see." I looked away. A fly buzzed against the window, annoyingly rebounding off the dirty glass over and over again. Finally giving up, it blundered into a spiderweb, struggling as a large brown spider descended from the rafters. The spider enveloped it, the fly's movements weakening as it was cocooned.

But it wasn't dead, just paralyzed.

"You can have the core."

A short while later, we were ready to go. Rubberface had made some kind of report, his eyes blank, his throat muscles twitching, for about five minutes. I had one more bowl of his stew.

As I put on an overcoat, he offered me something. I

picked the vial from his outstretched palm.

"Fugue?"

He nodded, his eyes calm. "Something very like it. More of a therapeutic drug, really. Your people have very little control over consciousness. I've yet to encounter an intelligent species as enslaved to memory as yours . . ." he shook his head. "Use it if you have to. It . . . it won't be as bad as the other."

The vial began to grow warm in my hand. "What?"

"Put it on the table."

I did, and watched as it slowly melted into the wood, glowing yellow and green, before coalescing again. Now there were two vials of fugue sitting in a little depression in the table, connected by a silvery thread.

"I've already given out a few of them. They fission once every three hours, once separated. The fugue market should collapse by the end of the month."

I screwed my eyes up, peering at him carefully. "Is this allowed? Isn't there some sort of prime directive, or something, for you guys?"

"Yes. Oddly enough, there is."

I fingered the storycube nervously as the train shrieked through Chinatown station. It was late. The only other passengers were bums like me, and a scattering of college students too drunk or stupid to realize how dangerous it was, this time of night.

The numbness, Rubberface's temporary anesthesia, is gone now, and I feel much better. I could probably live with it, now, what I did, or rather, what I failed to do. But I've made my decision. He says that there's always a chance that he's wrong, that I'll manage to shake off the addiction.

He says the future is never certain.

All he'd tell me was that if I statued, I wouldn't suffer. We got off the train at New England Medical, and rode the escalator up to the tunnel in silence.

"I can retrieve the data from the cube remotely."

We reached the corridor. "Yeah. Well, bye." I reached out my hand. He looked at it, smiled with his eyes, and grasped it firmly. It felt like a real hand. I sat down quickly on the brick, and lowered my head to my knees, the cube held tightly between my palms. I didn't want him to see the tears in my eyes.

He brushed the back of my head.

I came to, sitting in a brick corridor. Disoriented, I tried to figure out where the hell I was. The distant click of steel wheels and the smell of urine brought me back. Subway tunnel. Someone was standing above me, looking down, a rubberface in a gray overcoat. I hate rubberfaces.

"What the hell are you looking at, dummy?"

He just nodded stupidly and shambled off down the hall.

I remembered my name was Joe Dunn, the aura fizzing and buzzing like mad. I would remember a lot more, soon, if I didn't do something. There was this

thing in my hand, a cube, featureless black. A paperweight maybe? Might be worth something. I slipped it into my shirt for safekeeping.

I fumbled in my pocket. Please, let me have some, please.

My fingers closed on a single vial. Smiling, I tugged open my forearm and popped it in. The shunt was clear. I closed it up and waited.

It's a late spring day. Elisa is running up the slope to where Linda is smiling, kneeling down to sweep her up into her arms. The grass squirms between my naked toes, the food is warm in my stomach, the air is sweet. My vacation is just beginning, two workless weeks with my

family spread out before me. Linda's new medication seems to be working, thank God.

In this instant, I know that I love them both.

Birds fly by overhead, frozen immobile. The breeze carries the scent of lilac and freshly mowed grass. The moment goes on and on. It occurs to me that I feel good, very good.

In fact, I've never felt better in my life.

—E. JAY O'CONNELL

ERRATA: In Issue 6, the GALAXY AUDIO PROJECT listing did not and should have included for Tape 3: H.L. Gold's "The Biography Project" and Janni Lee Simmers' "Three Wish Habit" and for Tape 2: Don Webb's "The Words, The Names."

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Catherine Oxenberg, Director
Photo: E.J. Gold

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COKE BOTTLE LENSES

By ROBERT E. ROGOFF

Illustrated by Zoë

Returning from her first season at the Academy, Rosemaryh Randt hugged the squat, pruned, and wizened man and woman standing in the irised-open door.

"Get in here out of the light," urged her mother. Her father just grinned at the situation, as if sharing a secret with himself.

Once inside, the family sat down and tendered idle catch-up chitchat as their reunion gifts. As the daylight outside slowly reddened out into a spectacular Pacific Ocean sunset, Cadet Rosemaryh slowly exhausted the supply of adventure stories she had accumulated. By contrast, the expansive years which her parents had shared, though less exciting, stretched into a relatively longer, much fuller-written tale of daily survival as things merely got better and better on Earth.

Rosemaryh finally had to say her goodnights, as it had been a tiresome journey crammed into the claustrophobic transport with all the other cadets coming out of rotation. She trundled into the bedroom she had left when her parents had been in their late thirties and she sixteen, and as she saw the same furniture, the same

dinosaur-patterned wallpaper she had left behind as a teenager, a youthful warmth kindled within her cool, athletic body. She felt the bouncy cushioning when she plopped her lean frame onto the soft bed.

She sighed and allowed her eyes to flutter. "Lights off," she called. It was only when the lights stayed lit she remembered this room had a lamp that had to be switched off manually. Fingering the stud, picturing herself retaking her bed position in soothing darkness, she paused.

Set upside-down on the dresser, coated with a thin veneer of dust, were the coke-bottle lensed eyeglasses she had used before her operation. She picked them up and cherished them in her slender-fingered hands, recalling how she had used them not only to see better but to look better.

As an adolescent, her now-lanky frame had been pudgey, unauthoritarian. The strong frames turned her chubby-cheeked face into that of an owlish student, and for the first time in her young life, suddenly her schoolteachers began to call on her more regularly. As a result, she had accelerated her learning curve quickly and was rewarded richly. For today she was among the select few whose academic prowess had landed her a spot in the Academy. Her Cadet training was something not just anyone could tolerate, much less excel in. At the Academy, she was at the top of her class.

Rosemaryh started to replace the glasses, but then she got another idea. She was remembering more and more about her early school days now. Three-hundred

sixty-five and one quarter. The sums of the squares of the sides. Equal and opposite reaction. Freed the slaves and assassinated. The penny in the glass.

Stuck in remembrance, like a computer program going continuously in the background that refused to shut off, Rosemaryyh looked to the side, into the mirror which was there the way she knew it would be. She wiped around its surface so as to clear an opening in the dust and raised the glasses to her eyes.

Unfortunately, now that her eyesight was perfect, the glasses only distorted her image and stabbed an ache through her head. Nauseous, she removed the glasses and was reassured to see her normal high-cheekboned twenty-year-old's face gazing back at her from the dust-moted mirrorglass. She smiled at the handsome woman's body she had grown into while off Earth, and set the glasses back down, right next to a dusty drinking glass which somehow had still survived the years untouched on her dresser, half-full of a brownish liquid.

Involuntarily she giggled. The penny in the glass.

Back in first grade again, pudgy little Rosemaryyh had fidgeted, bored in her tiny desk while the stern, white-haired teacher, Ms. Harddriver, stood at the front of the schoolroom, tapping the big, brown globe with her hard fingernails. "Class," explained Ms. Harddriver, "Be sure never to overindulge in the ancient brew known as cola. Cola will rot your teeth — it's full of something that will even — well, go home tonight and drop a copper penny into a glass of cola. Leave it there a month and then just you see what condition that poor metal coin is in!"

Rosemaryyh now remembered she had gone home that night and started the experiment merely to prove the

teacher wrong. But being a first-grader, one distraction led to another and somehow the penny in the glass was totally forgotten to this day over a century later.

She knew the acid in the cola would have completely dissolved that little coin by now. Edging around the lip of the glass with a finger, she threw back her head and laughed. But she wondered if the cola itself was still good. Tentatively, she raised the glass to her lips and sipped.

That refreshing bite powered back a wonderful memory flow of warm, lazy summers on the beach, gathering smooth pebbles and delicate shells in her little hands. Drowsily, she forgot for a moment this glass had apparently been sitting over a century and gulped the remaining cola down.

She nearly choked to death.

She managed to cough the obstruction up. The penny. So, Ms. Harddriver had been lying, or mistaken, or joking, that fall day back in 2097. And suddenly, Rosemaryyh wondered not only about the penny in the glass, but about everything else. If the penny in the glass was not true, was the sums of the squares of the sides true? Was freed the slaves and assassinated true?

Just what exactly was true? Rosemaryyh felt very small, very cold, and very, very stupid. And then she suddenly realized — there was an easy way to reality-test this situation. The year was now 2231. If the penny was dated 2097 or earlier, then Rosemaryyh would worry.

Rosemaryyh flipped the coin to its obverse side and looked at the date.

—ROBERT E. ROGOFF



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THE DEAD-END

By JEAN MARIE STINE

Illustrated by Finlay

The last science fiction <writer>. Sat alone. Before the last <simulator>. And tried to <think>.

There had once been a time. Of unlimited imagination. Of boundless potential. When anything was possible. When new dreams. A million possible futures. A thousand maybe worlds. Were minted everyday.

The writer knew this. Had tracked it down. Through <records>. <Memory>. To the deepest cellular level. Science fiction. Fundamental part. Hume existence.

The last science fiction <writer>. Sat alone. In a <room>. Without inspiration. Mind a blank. Unable to think of a single idea for a <story>.

Knew <it> should be easy. Just pick a theme. <Dozen> of classic themes. In science fiction.

There was the wonders of alien worlds . . .

The writer <looked> out the <wall>. Quadruple shadows. Maroon skies. Airtrees — fronds growing downward toward the ground. Immense iridescent

<whales> glazing high among their roots. The lightningfalls that reared above the <domicile>.

And could think of nothing exciting. Amazing. Fantastic. Or astounding. Enough. To justify beginning.

There was time travel . . .

The writer's <bondmate> appeared. "I join us. We're off to the age of the Great Migration. Imagine. They still used ships, transmats and other <machines>. To journey from galaxy to galaxy. You spend too much time. Cooped up in this <place>. It's not good for you."

The writer couldn't think. Of a single exciting idea. In time travel.

There was the ultimate possibilities of evolution . . .

The writer tried to concentrate. Tune out distractions. Any <entities> operating on the higher <mental bands> this is the <star> canopus. Seeking to join <minds> with those interested in <interlocking> metalogs. Please contact me <818-000-0000>.

Here, too, the author drew a blank.

There was humekind's origin . . . prehistory . . .

At last. The writer had an idea. Began to <compose>. The first star ship. Arced out. From Earth. Carrying the mind of humekind. All aboard knew it was a voyage that could determine the future of the race. Set it free from confinement on a single planet. And allow it to claim its heritage: the stars.

The writer's <progeny> arrived. "What do you think about this?" the writer asked.

"iNot that hoary old cliché <prog>. It was disproved long ago. <Everyone> knows. Humes evolved between the stars. Crafted ships. To reach planets." <Laughed>.

The writer <expunged> that <record>.

There had once been a time. Of unlimited imagination. Of boundless potential. When new dreams. A million possible futures. A thousand maybe worlds. Were minted everyday.

How had science fiction writers. Don't it. Envisioned. All those exciting. Potential futures? Seen something different. For the humerace. To do. Be. Experience.

The writer <mocked up> a body. Extruded. A limb. Scratched <head>. There were times. When it was so much. More satisfying. To be physical.

Then dissolved. Body. <Room>. <Simulator>. Back into Primordial elements. From which had so recently. Created them.

Maybe it was time. To visit. That universe they had discovered. Where the laws of physics. Were said to be. Even stranger. Than those of the last. Dozen or so. Perhaps that. Would help <spark>. A new idea.

—JEAN MARIE STINE

Galaxy

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MY LIFE AMONG THE STARS

By BJO TRIMBLE

Illustrated by Courtney

Balance of Terror (Title refers to an Eisenhower speech on the cold war, where he refers to keeping peace with a "balance of terror.") German: "Spock unter Verdacht" (Spock Under Suspicion) Japanese: "Uchuukichi SOS" (S.O.S. From a Starbase) Portuguese: "Medida de Terror"; "O equilibrio do Terror"

Writer: PAUL SCHNEIDER

Director: VINCE McEVEETY

Assistant Director: GREGG PETERS

Producer: GENE RODDENBERRY

Music Score: FRED STEINER

Location: Enterprise, Desilu 9

Aired: 12/15/66

STARDATE: 1709.2 — Kirk is to officiate at the wedding of Enterprise crewmen Angela Martine and Robert Tomlinson when he is interrupted by a distress call.

Romulans have launched an unprovoked attack on Federation outposts, guardians of the neutral zone between Federation and Romulan territory. Until this encounter, the Federation has never met the Romulans face to face, and humans have no idea what the aliens look like. The Romulans have an invisibility screen or cloak and a new weapon, photon torpedoes.

The attackers head for home, with the USS Enterprise in pursuit. The invisibility cloak makes it

impossible to detect anything outside the ship, so the Romulans cannot tell if the "blip" following them is an enemy ship or a harmless echo. The Enterprise picks up a picture of the Romulans' bridge and learns that the Romulans are of Vulcan descent, with the same pointed ears. This makes Lieutenant Stiles — whose forebears fought and died in the Romulan War — suspicious of Spock. The Romulan commander, a man of great character, attempts to shake off the Enterprise but is forced to turn and fight, though his ship is low on fuel.

The Enterprise loses most of its phaser power when a leak in the Enterprise's phaser coolant system poisons the air, disabling Tomlinson and Stiles. Spock fires the phaser manually and risks phaser coolant poisoning to rescue the two men. Tomlinson dies, but Stiles survives, and overcomes his bigotry. The Romulan ship is disabled, and its commander, rather than submit to capture, salutes Kirk as an honored enemy and destroys his own ship. The moral is about bigotry and honor.

CAST:

Kirk: WILLIAM SHATNER

Spock: LEONARD NIMOY

McCoy: DeFOREST KELLEY

Scott: JAMES DOOHAN

Sulu: GEORGE TAKEI

Uhura: NICHELLE NICHOLS

Yeoman Rand: GRACE LEE WHITNEY

Lieutenant Andrew Stiles: PAUL COMI

Specialist Robert Tomlinson: STEPHEN MINES

Specialist 2/C Angela Martine: BARBARA BALDAVIN

Commander Hansen: GARRY WALBERG

Crewman Fields: JOHN ARNDT

Romulan Commander: MARK LENARD

Decius: LAWRENCE MONTAIGNE

The Centurion: JOHN WARBURTON

Romulan Scanner Operator: ROBERT CHADWICK

Romulan Crewman: WALTER DAVIS

Romulan Crewman: VINCE DEADRICK

NOTES:

This episode is a futuristic "Enemy Below" or "Silent Running" submarine story.

Captain Kirk shows self-doubt, asking "Why me?" when he must make a command decision that could start a galactic war. McCoy comforts Kirk with "there is only one of each of us" and each of us is needed.

Kirk knows football — he refers to making an "end-run" around the Romulans.

Spock is more excitable than in later episodes — he is still being shaped as that "interesting alien" on the bridge. Spock raises both eyebrows and almost smiles when he sees Romulans — he is not surprised to see Vulcanoid aliens; Romulan ancestors left Vulcan long before the Age of Logic.

Spock has a book with him in the briefing room. But he doesn't need a book when Kirk asks him about types of comets — he knows his astronomy by heart.



FOR YOUR INFORMATION

By **CLAUDE NEEDHAM, Ph.D.**

Illustrated by Freas

I don't know; it might not bother you, but every now and then I get a little weirded out by the *shear mass* of history. We like to think of ourselves and our planet as being new. "Oh, look dear. It's the sunrise. A new day is on its way." In case you weren't aware of it, the sun doesn't rise. No more than it's true that W.C. Fields would actually thrust his nose firmly between his opponent's teeth and pull him to the floor on top of him. "Yes, officer, I admit it. I repeatedly slammed my face and body into the assailant's fists and feet."

The sun is the equivalent of a solar couch-potato. It sits at the center of the solar system while a bunch of planets, asteroids and a few comets revolve and rotate — apparently industrious. We'll leave the question of true industry to the philosophers. Not because they are equipped to handle it — but because it drives them crazy and I do so love watching them scuttle around like Kafkaesque cockroaches trying to extract the apple of an idea from their backsides.

To be fair to the sun, it's not always such a stay-at-home lazy-do-nothing. Quite the contrary. In its capacity as a star, the sun is very much the mover and groover. Maybe when viewed from the proper frame of reference your household couch-potato isn't such a lazy bum after all. Let's face it, guys. If you provide warmth so a bunch of hairless apes don't freeze their bare little butts off and provide enough rays to grow food for their

hairless not-so-little bellies, you get better press.

So what does this have to do with the apparency of newness that gets ascribed to each day? You got me there. From a physical point of view we're looking at a rather large ball of molten stuff (magma) with a thin crust of mostly cooled scum (*terra firma*) floating on the surface of said ball spinning like a top while it makes a yearly revolution in a near-vacuum at near zero absolute (4°K) around the sun.

In case you were wondering how we know that it takes the Earth a year to revolve around the sun, some long-dead guy that was an amateur in his day is now called a Scientist defined it that way.

A year is the time it takes for the Earth to go once around the sun and a day is the time it takes for the Earth to spin once on the dial. Hopefully, the music of the spheres doesn't go the way of FM.

Are you old enough to remember when FM was experimental music and mostly non-commercial? At one point it was a social crime to listen to FM and you could be rat-packed if they (the not-so-hairless descendants of killer apes) caught you reading science fiction. I don't know if nature abhors it, but people sure have a hard time handling anything new or different.

So what does all of this have to do with my being weirded out by the *shear pressure* of history? I spent a lot of time studying water in graduate school. For a few years I was on the forefront of research into the physical-chemical properties of water. Then I dropped out of the race and fell back into the spectator stands of *Science* magazine and *Scientific American*.

Water is one of the major wonders of science, and very understudied — and I don't mean there are lots of aspiring actresses hoping it breaks a leg just before opening night. We are talking not - enough - good - scientists - directing - serious - attention - into - the -

area.

For the longest time it totally puzzled me why such a rich area of study as the physical-chemical properties of water went so neglected. I had a brief chat with Madame Pullman about just this point following her guest lecture. She had a similar lament about phosphate head rotations in cellular membranes.

Then one Friday night during the qualitative sampling of various fermented hop-products the answer came to me. Actually, it was more during the process of returning said fermented products. You are aware, I assume, that you can't buy beer? So while I was busy returning a rather large quantity of rented beer, it suddenly dawned on me that a dinosaur probably carried the very same water molecules that I had recently shuttled the fifty feet from table to bathroom.

The little H₂O's that I was so earnestly hoping would not splash back at me were probably veterans of thousands, hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of round trip excursions into and out of a variety of dinosaur bladders.

When I got back to the table, my lab partners were just beginning the sampling process of a new pitcher — for further qualitative analysis, one would assume. Biologists may be able to draw a graph based on a single point, but chemists (like us) needed lots of data points. Physicists, on the other hand, know *all* the formulas. Give them one data point and they can extrapolate the whole rest of the graph.

After a brief, but enthusiastic exposition concerning my recent leap of understanding into the history of water molecules, my former friends looked at me as if I had just crawled out from under a rather scummy and unkempt rock.

It was many months later that the full implication of my lab-mates' responses became clear to me. No one wants to confront the fact that every glass of water that one drinks contains molecules of H₂O that have been through countless millions of kidneys and bladders. Oh, I can hear the scientific-realists now, saying, "Yes, but the water molecules get cleaned-up by sand-filtration and the evaporative rain process." Well, if that's true, why can't we all become virgins again by a good shower, white undies, and a midnight move to a new town?

Nature is the ultimate recycler. Did you know that nature is still using the same formula for water that it has been using since . . . maybe even clear back to just a few days after the most recent big bang? Recent big bang? It's a bitch, isn't it? Even the big bang was made from previously used parts.


We are not the first and we won't be the last to use the atoms and molecules that make up the lump of hamburger called "me." We are renters in every sense of the word. And don't give me that "we like to buy so we can build equity. To whom are you going to sell, and where are you going to relocate if they buy?"

— CLAUDE NEEDHAM, Ph.D.

S.L. Boyd
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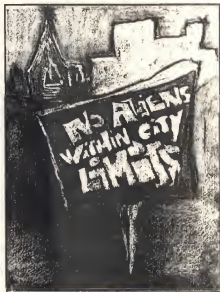
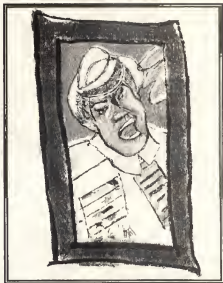
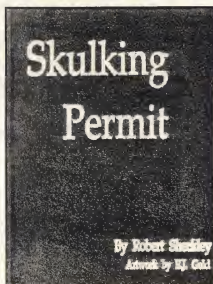
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Skulking Permit was published in a deluxe edition of 15 copies with original serigraph frontispiece by E.J. Gold, and many other original illustrations. In addition, 5 serigraphs in a portfolio accompany this edition.

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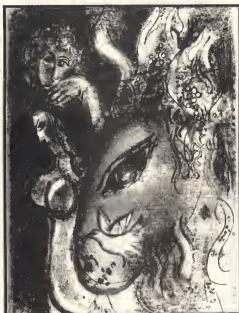
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The other illustrations for the serigraph were prepared by Nancy Christie and the book was printed in the studio of E.J. Gold by Remington Litho under the direct supervision of the artist.

The text was set in the type of E.J. Gold by Remington Litho under the direct supervision of the artist.

The book was reproduced as facsimile. Copyright 1985 paper in a edition 1985, with the letterhead and text printed by the artist in a studio 1985.

The custom head-on head-on binding with gold embossing and French marbled paper was done at Gold's Litho in Sacramento.

A.J. Langguth

E.J. Gold



JESUS CHRISTS

BY A.J. LANGGUTH

The illustrations for this book have a common thread which reminds one of the subtlety of mood created by Langguth. Working with transparency and layering Gold's imagery evokes an otherworldly quality present in this classic tale.

Gold's knowledge of science fiction and his complete ease in the graphic medium put him in a very rare position and enable him to act both as editor and illustrator of a very high quality small publisher of limited editions.



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JESUS CHRISTS
A novel by A.J. Langguth, illustrated by E.J. Gold

"Just as we had become accustomed to the fact that the only private religious fiction today is being written by Norman Mailer, this novel comes along to surprise and enchant us. A comic religious novel? ... Impossible, but if it has happened. It is either one of the convoluted rejections of the Christian enterprise in our time, or one of the subtlest expressions of admiration for Jesus. Or both. Or neither..."

—The New Republic

Suppose that the historical Jesus and his disciples, as chronicled in the Gospels, are an archetype of divine revelation. OK, that's not hard to accept, whether you're a Christian or belong to any other religion or even if you are Buddhist, agnostic or atheist. Now suppose that, since the New Testament narratives are archetypal events, there is in every other period of history another Jesus with another set of disciples, much like the original. How about, historical events for the difference in culture and historical context, whether it be the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, or World War II in Europe.

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A.J. Langguth has had a long and distinguished, not to mention highly diversified, career as a professional writer. He was born in 1923 in Minneapolis, attended Harvard College, where he also worked for a year, and then served in the U.S. Army in 1957-58. He was Political Editor at the Valley Times, San Francisco Valley, from 1960-65. Then went on to the New York Times to become Bureau Chief of Saigon during the eventful year 1965. He wrote as a freelancer and authored five books—beginning with Jesus Christs—between 1966 and 1978, when he joined the faculty of the Journalism School, University of Southern California, where he is currently assistant to a full professor.



E.J. Gold, The Designer
Chromed on River DFK 11 x 15, 1992.

Rarities for Sale

Hieroglyphic Ori Appollinis Niliaci descriptis notis et sculpturis libri duo, quibus accessit versio recens, per Jo. Mercerum coninnata, et observationes non infrugiferae.

Parisiis, J. Kerver 1551.

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Maillol, Aristide. Virgile. Les Géorgiques.

Texte Latin et version française de l'Abbé Jacques Delille, gravures sur bois d'Aristide Maillol. Paris, Philippe Gonin, 1937-43 (1950). 2 vols. 4to. (2), 174, (2); (2), 154, (2) pp. including 122 woodcuts, of which some are illustrated initial letters.

Unsewn, as issued, in publisher's cream wrappers, preserved in quarter vellum slipcase and chemise. With the prospectus for the work, loosely inserted.

One of a limited edition of 750 copies printed on rag-wove paper, watermarked with *Maillol's* "seated nude".

Maillol began the first drawings for this project in 1908 when, returning from a trip to Greece with Count Harry Kessler of the Cranach Press, he stopped over at Naples and Pompeii.

Over the next three decades, he added a few more cuts to the original work and in 1937 Gonin urged him to resume the project; the final block was delivered just before the artist died.

Maillol's eyesight was poor during the last years of his life, so the actual cutting for the project was executed by craftsmen working from the artist's sketches made directly on the print surface of the wood block.

See: Artist & Book p. 175 This copy is no. 472/750.

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Ross, Frederick. The Ruined Abbeys of Britain.

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McLean writes that "the plates are certainly magnificent."

Ref: Friedman, *Color Printing in England*, p. 34.

McLean, VBD, p. 204

The twelve color plates capture the eeriness of the moors and the ruins of medieval abbeys of old England. In addition, there are many fine wood engravings in black-and-white throughout, and a fascinating text.

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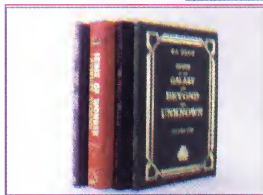
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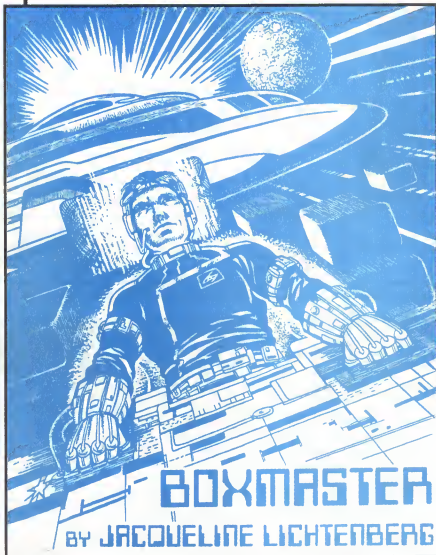
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